

Poultney Comes Together

Update and Implementation Plan January 2020



Image by Peter Huntoon

Produced by the **Town of Poultney** in partnership with the **Vermont Council on Rural Development**, the **Vermont Agency of Commerce & Community Development**, and the **Vermont Community Foundation**

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Poultney Downtown Revitalization Committee (PDRC)

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✓ **Poultney Comes Together - Overview**

In March 2019, over 200 Poultney residents came together to discuss the impacts on the town associated with the closing of Green Mountain College, and to consider what community residents could do to address the challenges facing Poultney.

As a result of this “Poultney Comes Together” process, the community identified the following five key priorities for action by task forces:

- **Expansion of trails, biking and outdoor recreation opportunities as an economic driver for Poultney’s future**
- **Developing a Poultney co-working space and incubator for start-up businesses**
- **Development of a bank**
- **Improvements to broadband and Wi-Fi infrastructure**
- **Boosting downtown Poultney**

Over the past six months, members of the community, working together with town manager Paul Donaldson and selectboard chair Jeff King, have donated their time and efforts to advance these priorities. This report provides a brief description of these efforts, including recommendations and ideas that will help realize the priorities identified by the community.

As a follow-up to these efforts, the town will be establishing a coordinating group made up of representatives from local organizations and community volunteers to help coordinate the implementation of those ideas and recommendations and thus advance the community's priorities. Implementation will begin in the summer of 2020.

As we enter 2020, we continue to seek the input and assistance of all concerned in working together to revitalize the town and village of Poultney.

II. Task Force Activities and Recommendations

✓ Trails, Biking and Outdoor Recreation

The Trails, Biking and Outdoor Recreation Task Force is led by Slate Valley Trails (SVT) with Silvia Cassano, Gail Helfer and Chuck Helfer as co-chairs, and with assistance from the following task force members: Ted Barnett, Ed Bove, Pamela Burlingame, Scott MacLachlan, Caitrin Maloney, Tom Mauhs-Pugh, Kim Rupe, Hilary Solomon, Chris Smid and Joel Tilley.

➤ *Expanding Efforts with Trails*

D&H Trail Connections:

The Delaware & Hudson Rail Trail (D&H Trail) is a 20.5-mile multi-use trail open to pedestrians, bicyclists and horseback riders during the summer, and snowshoers, skiers and snowmobilers during the winter.



The D&H Trail encompasses two sections in Vermont. These sections are separated by eight miles, four and a half of them undeveloped, where the old rail line crosses into New York south of Poultney village and then returns to Vermont at West Pawlet. From there, the trail continues south to West Rupert. The northern section of the trail has parking and trailheads near both ends - to the north in Castleton and to the south on Poultney's Depot Street.

The State of Vermont has awarded a contract for surface improvements and signage on the trail's two sections in Vermont. The work will take place in 2020.

Village to Trails Linkage:

Members of the task force are working with town manager Paul Donaldson and several selectboard members to connect Poultney village and the D&H Trail with East Poultney and existing SVT trails in the eastern part of the town. They have identified two potential corridors, one north and one south of Poultney village, and are speaking with landowners about their willingness to let a trail cross their land.

Poultney Elementary School:

SVT has received a grant from the Vermont State Employees Credit Union to fund the construction of a short bicycle skills track and beginner's loop for both bicyclists and walkers at Poultney Elementary School. Construction is expected to begin in May.

In addition, SVT is working with a landowner near the elementary school to secure an agreement for the design and construction of a small network of multi-use trails.

Lake Saint Catherine State Park:

In 2018, SVT received a grant from the Vermont Mountain Bike Association to design a bicycle trail at Lake Saint Catherine State Park, in the southern part of Poultney. The state park then applied for and received Recreational Trails Program funding from the state to build the trail, which Sustainable Trailworks and the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps completed in the fall of 2019. This trail is open to day use by the general public as well as overnight park guests.

➤ ***Other Outdoor Recreation Efforts***

Recreation Economy for Rural Communities Grant:

In September 2019, the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that the Town of Poultney was one of 10 communities to receive a grant under the Recreation Economy for Rural Communities

(RERC) assistance program, to help revitalize Main Street through outdoor recreation.

Through the RERC assistance, a consultant hired by EPA will help the town and its partners expand the local outdoor recreation economy in ways that promote sustainable resource management and environmentally friendly community development.

As noted in the EPA's press release, "The selected communities are planning to revitalize their communities in a variety of ways, including building new trail connections, boosting downtown amenities, connecting nearby hiking-biking trails to downtown, and working to attract recreation-related economic opportunities."

The planning process will take place over four to six months, with a two-day facilitated community workshop as the focal point. Participants will work together to identify a vision, goals and specific actions to realize those goals.

Expanding Outdoor Recreation Outings for Youth and Adults:

The next phase of the Poultney Elementary School project is to acquire bicycles and helmets so that the school can integrate bicycle riding and safety into its curriculum.

Engaging the public and other organizations in work days to help with trail maintenance constitutes an important SVT activity. In 2019, employees from GE's Rutland plant, students from Poultney's private LiHigh School, Poultney High School students interning with the Poultney Mettowee Natural Resources Conservation District's Lake Education and Action Program volunteered on SVT trails. The Fairground Trails, in the eastern part of Poultney, benefited from two days of volunteer trail maintenance. Volunteers also spent several weeks during the summer helping with the construction of a new trail that connects to the Delaney Woods trail system in Wells.

In the fall of 2019, several SVT members worked with Middletown Springs Elementary School students on a skills-and-ride day at the Fairgrounds trailhead.

In the summer of 2020, SVT plans to offer a bicycle program for youth through Poultney Recreation.

Community members interested in having more outings can reach out to SVT to help it with its 2020 outings calendar. These activities may include, for example, mountain bike rides, D&H Trail rides and walks, nature walks, trail runs, bike rides on gravel roads, youth programming and educational programs.

Improving the Marketing and Promotion of Trails:

In November SVT began its second business sponsorship program, for 2020, and considered ways to get more businesses involved. Funds raised from the business sponsorship program will support programming and events, trail maintenance, and stewardship of the SVT trails system.

The SVT website is a comprehensive resource featuring detailed local maps, trail information, and an interactive Google map of regional trails. Funding will be sought to develop a regional overview map for usage in promotional materials, at trailheads, around Poultney, and on websites that bring folks to the area.

SVT is partnering with local and regional groups such as Stone Valley Arts and the Rutland County Audubon Society to promote the town and provide information about outdoor recreation in Poultney and the region.

Athletic Competition Event – Ideas for 2020:

One suggestion is for the town to consider hosting an annual outdoor recreation competition that would highlight the myriad of outdoor recreation benefits that Poultney has to offer and would be tied to use of the trails and Lake Saint Catherine. Plans are meanwhile under way for SVT to host a trail running event in the fall of 2020.

The SVT trails network works well for outdoor, recreation-based outings and events. However, there is a limit to staging large events, given the moderate amount of available parking near SVT-managed trails. Large events will need to be held in Poultney village or at the state park, where there is enough parking and a large enough staging area.

Coordinating with Local Businesses to Sponsor Events and Promote Trails:

As mentioned above, promotion of area trails is well under way through SVT's business sponsorship program, social media, and the distribution of promotional materials.

✓ **Boosting Downtown Poultney**

The Boosting Downtown Poultney Task Force is chaired by Robert Mitnik, with assistance from C.B. Hall, Chrispin White, and Mandy Mitnik as chairs of the task force's groups, and with the help of the following task force members: Kyle Callahan, Joe DeBonis, Ruth Ann Fischer, Doug Freilich, Nick Gutierrez, Doug Langdon, Mariah Lovejoy, Patricia McWilliams, Suanne Ohl, Charlene Rapinz, Jonas Rosenthal, Kristen Ross, Kim Rupe, Dawn Sarli, Ina Smith and Dick Weis.

This task force has been addressing the myriad issues related to revitalization of Poultney's downtown. Task force members have come up with numerous ideas and recommendations regarding downtown events, ways to improve the downtown streetscape, and zoning changes that will help preserve the existing character of the downtown and attract retail and service uses. They have identified ways to help fund such efforts through grants and other funding assistance.

Four groups were created to review the Poultney Comes Together action steps, as discussed below.

Businesses and Organizations Group – C.B. Hall, chair

Established Businesses:

The group noted interest in having Main Street businesses open on Friday nights for what it has dubbed "Friday Night frolics." Pre-football-game events, music at local restaurants, programs at Stone Valley Arts, and the Lakes Region Farmers' Market, in addition to the open stores, could bring people downtown on Friday evenings. A late May start was suggested.

An effort will be made to enlist support from downtown businesses and start with one Friday per month - perhaps the first Friday. The group will reach out, for example, to the Chamber of Commerce and American Legion, and to the school board, asking if it would be willing to leave the

lights on at the basketball courts and recreation field at the elementary school for later-evening use on the Fridays in question.

The group has also recommended launching a traditional welcome wagon that would give new residents information on local businesses, organizations and services. Members of the group will be asking businesses for coupons that will attract new residents as customers.

New Businesses:

The group has noted significant positive progress since the Poultney Comes Together meeting in late May, in that new businesses have opened or are in the planning stages, as described below. Where appropriate, the group has advised the new property owners of grant opportunities available, for example for the renovation of historic structures.

OLD FREIGHT DEPOT: The historic Delaware & Hudson freight depot, vacant for several years, was recently acquired by a Poultney couple who plan on converting it into an apartment and a retail shop, probably a home-decorating and gift shop. They intend to preserve the historic attributes of the structure.

CAFÉ: The former food co-op has been sold at auction to a Poultney couple who plan to transform the space into a café. Members of the group indicated a willingness to lend a hand when a work party is needed. The couple hopes to open sometime in 2020.

VEMAS PROPERTY: A hemp processing facility has occupied the main VEMAS building on Beaman Street since September. A fishing gear business has reportedly leased or rented a smaller building on the VEMAS property.

BRASS BUTTERFLY BUILDING: The REclaimED nonprofit, which previously occupied one of the VEMAS buildings, is now renting about two-thirds of the long-vacant Brass Butterfly Building in downtown Poultney. (See under Co-Working Space.)

NEW RESTAURANT: A new restaurant, the Taco Experiment, opened in half of a former diner on Main Street in July. The owner expects to complete renovation of the other half of the premises in the near future to provide additional dining space.

HOBBY SHOP: On January 3rd a Poultney couple will open a new hobby shop in a space that formerly housed a yarn shop on Main Street. Model trains and cars will be featured.

REPAIR SHOP: An auto repair business has opened in the former gas station at the intersection of Main and Beaman streets.

INSURANCE OFFICE: A new insurance office is expected to open in early January in a recently sold block on the south side of Main Street.

CITIZENS BANK BUILDING: A local law firm is purchasing the former Citizens Bank Building on Main Street and expects to move in by about mid-January. The interior of the building, vacant for almost two years, is currently undergoing renovations in anticipation of the firm's arrival.

Pharmacy:

With the town's official support, the group is reaching out to pharmacy companies to solicit their interest in locating in Poultney. The group worked with the town to prepare a letter that is being sent to key local pharmacies that may be interested.

Green Mountain College campus:

As of early December, three parties were interested in acquiring the college's property. They included an organization offering education and

training to veterans; the nature of the other two parties is uncertain. No more recent information is available.

Colliers International, the real estate firm engaged to sell the campus, has been advised of inaccuracies in its advertising for the property, in the hope of encouraging its sale.

The 110-acre campus and its buildings continue to be well maintained and funds are available to continue its upkeep. Former GMC president Bob Allen had also reported that the facilities might be used periodically by outside organizations that submit their request. The property's trustee will address these requests on a case-by-case basis.

Marketing and Communications Group – Chrispin White, chair

Improving Communications:

This group has been working on a communications plan for Poultney that will coordinate with events in surrounding towns. Group members are reaching out to nearby communities that have been successful in listing events through one easy-to-access resource.

Improving the Mapping of Town Attractions:

The group is also looking at traffic studies to identify the entry corridors funneling people to Main Street. It plans to add signage about events and attractions in Poultney on these entry corridors.

Improving Promotion of the Downtown:

The group noted that the Stonebridge Welcome Center does not seem effective, possibly because it is not on Main Street. The group therefore recommended considering an information center on Main Street, possibly in connection with the work being done by the Trails, Biking and Outdoor Recreation Task Force.

Community Space Planning Group - Mandy Mitnik, chair

Utilizing Main Street More Often:

This group looked at various events that could bring people downtown. A fall Welsh Festival was suggested for 2020. This event could include music, a rugby game, artists, and a pumpkin carving and/or scarecrow contest. In the past, Green Mountain College sponsored Welsh celebrations that were well received by the community.

Streetscape Improvements:

The group also looked at various ways to make the downtown more attractive. Murals came under consideration. They could be historical photos of Poultney projected or mounted onto Main Street buildings or even images painted directly onto them. The murals could be changed regularly or they could be permanent. Possible mural sites include the Full Belly Deli parking lot wall, as shown below.



A conception of the Full Belly Deli parking lot wall with a depiction of the Poultney River gorge superimposed

The group also discussed making the windows of downtown businesses more attractive. Suggestions included holiday decorations and historical depictions. Plaques detailing the history of the buildings with photos could be made. Stone Valley Arts may be interested in curating these displays.

Other suggestions for streetscape improvements included a banner or marquee on the Journal Press Building, banners on the light poles on Main Street, and trees on Furnace Street. The group also recommended yearly prizes for façade improvements and restorations of downtown businesses and homes.

Legal (Zoning) and Financial Group – Robert Mitnik, chair

This group reviewed the land use and zoning regulations that apply to the downtown, as well as financial incentives available to help fund improvements in the downtown.

Historic Downtown:

The group noted that a downtown historic survey exists that identifies the area and extent of Poultney's historic center, a designated downtown under state law. The survey describes in detail over 80 individual structures in the downtown. There are however no specific zoning regulations regarding development in the area, other than the town bylaws applicable to all downtown buildings.

Future Financial Incentives:

The group set up a grant spreadsheet to identify available grants for funding improvements to downtown Poultney. The list is dynamic: it can be expanded and modified as the need arises. It is organized by grant name, agency, purpose, who can apply, date available and deadline, and monetary amount, with information on matching amounts to be added in the future by the town's economic development coordinator. The spreadsheet will be available through appropriate online portals, such as the town's website.

Existing Financial Incentives:

The group also noted that funding sources already exist for downtown improvements. The Poultney Downtown Revitalization Committee currently receives funds annually from both the village and town of Poultney. The town has applied for and received a municipal planning

grant from the state to update the town plan, and is working with the Rutland Regional Planning Commission on the plan's revision.

Land Use (Zoning) Regulations:

The group also looked at the action plan's goal of encouraging and strengthening the existing uses of the downtown so as to "provide for development [that will] maintain and reinforce the village as town center," as stated in the town plan (Article 4.20). Towards the achievement of this goal, four specific changes and amendments to the zoning bylaws were identified, as follows:

- ✓ Review permitted, site-plan-based and conditional uses so as to retain the character of the downtown, allow for denser and more affordable development, and reduce uncertainty for potential developers and investors.
- ✓ Review uses that are inappropriate for the downtown.
- ✓ Review building regulations, such as building setbacks, to encourage preservation of the existing pattern of development in the downtown and discourage sprawl and commercial strip development.
- ✓ For businesses and property owners, establish commercial design guidelines for the downtown in order to protect and conserve the architectural character of downtown buildings and promote good design when undertaking improvements to them. The guidelines would also be used by the Development Review Board, the Planning Commission and any other authorities having jurisdiction, in their review of proposed projects. Thoughtful design improvements reinforce the positive identity of the village center and help create a sense of place where people want to be, socialize, relax, shop and conduct business.
- ✓ Establish an entrance corridor overlay district to protect and enhance the major entryways into the village center. This would include:

- ✓ preserving the agricultural and rural character of the Route 30 corridor
- ✓ preventing strip development and encouraging development in the downtown
- ✓ giving Poultney a positive point of arrival which is unique to our community
- ✓ reconsidering the Beaman Street (Route 30) intersection with Main Street as regards identity and way-finding.

✓ **Co-Working Space**

The Co-Working Space Task Force is chaired by Danny Lang, with assistance from the following task force members: Jamison Lerner, Carl Diethelm, Lilly Driscoll, Matthew Devereux, Corey Dadds, Benjamin Webb, Sadie Koponen and Katie Barber.

This task force has been working hard to find ways to use existing buildings in the downtown for co-working space, including a makerspace and, potentially, co-working artists' studios, computer office space, and the like.

The task force's members have reached out to downtown property owners both to determine if vacant space can be used for such purposes, and to advance such possibilities generally. In a promising initial move, the REclaimED nonprofit, which has described itself as "a makerspace and community workshop . . . that aims to provide vocational skills training to anyone interested with regard to wood- and metalwork," has established itself in part of the otherwise vacant Brass Butterfly Building. (See photos below.) REclaimED expects to begin operations in March or April 2020.



The great team at the makerspace - happy to be located in their new home in the Brass Butterfly Building in downtown Poultney

✓ **Bank Development**

The Bank Development Task Force is chaired by Russ Hoffman, with assistance from the following task force members: Carol Bunce, Ryan Davenport, Linda Kirk, Ernie DeMatties, Pam Mikkelsen, Rich Mikkelsen, David Mook and Julie Sperling.

This task force has been working with the town to solicit interest in locating a bank in Poultney.

The Great Meadow Federal Credit Union of Granville, N.Y., is now able to locate in Vermont. Discussions have been fruitful with this financial institution regarding the possibility of establishing a branch in Poultney.

The town has explored the possibility of working with the University of Vermont to develop demographic and other data requested by Great Meadow in order to determine the feasibility of locating a branch in Poultney. UVM's work toward that end will however require funding that has not yet been identified.

➤ **Broadband and Wi-Fi Connections**

The Broadband and Wi-Fi Connections Task Force is chaired by Meghan Ohl, with assistance from the following task force members: Robin Chesnut-Tangerman, Douglas Gifford, Tom Johnson, Kristen Ross, Betsy Sinnott, Ina Smith and Mary Jo Teetor.

Broadband:

This task force has been working with local and state officials to identify the areas where improvements to broadband and Wi-Fi access are needed, and to get funding and support for connecting the remaining 10-20% of Poultney properties that have no such service.

The task force has reached out to state partners to see what resources they can provide to determine what percentage of consumers are actually utilizing the current broadband infrastructure, which serves 80-90% of the town's households.

Downtown Wi-Fi project:

The task force is also working with the town to determine what Wi-Fi connections are needed downtown and how to implement them. The task force is reaching out to Comcast, the Vermont cable vendor, to identify its expansion plans for our area.