

Community Leadership Guide



Community Leadership in Action

**A Vermont Guide to
Community Engagement
Project Development
and Resources**

The Vermont Council on Rural Development helps Vermont citizens build prosperous and resilient communities through democratic engagement, marshalling resources, and collective action.



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Production and printing of this report was made possible thanks to generous contributions from the **Northfield Savings Bank** and **Windham Foundation**.





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Produced by the **Vermont Council on Rural Development**

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The Vermont Council on Rural Development helps Vermonters build prosperous and resilient communities through democratic engagement, marshalling resources, and collective action.

Introduction

Welcome! We hope these pages will be useful to you in your work for the good of your community!

What is leadership? How do we define it? In democracy, leadership is a process; the act of stepping up for one's community, listening, adding up priorities for action, and working with others to promote the common good. For us at the Vermont Council on Rural Development, leadership is not about defining an elite, but supporting anyone who lines up in service of their community. We believe that local leadership is the single most important ingredient for building unity, setting direction, and achieving progress in the face of the daunting economic and demographic challenges that confront Vermont.

In every community across the state, Vermonters of all ages, backgrounds, and diverse circumstances are being called to action. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the foundations of our communities and our economy. Even in times of relative peace and quiet, hardworking local officials and unofficial leaders are vital to the fabric of our communities. When towns and regions come together to set direction, as they do in VCRD's Community Visit process, new leaders often emerge with transformative ideas and energy to help the community rise to meet its challenges. In light of the devastating impacts of COVID-19, local leaders stepping forward to promote civil dialogue will be more important than ever, and is already well underway in many communities across the state.

In democracy, all citizens are called upon to lead. Where leaders step up, towns achieve great things. Motivated by a wonderful and binding patriotism of place, local leaders in all their diversity throughout Vermont are constructing a future, building momentum, and making democracy real. Today as much as any time in our recent history, Vermonters are working together to respond to crisis, and to rebuild the foundations of our communities and our state for a resilient future. At VCRD, we are honored and excited to be part of that work with you.

About the Guide

This "Community Leadership in Action" guide is not the final word on any community or economic development project or process. It's designed instead to be a starting point, with tips and strategies to help new, emerging, and veteran leaders frame local issues and move projects forward. The first section offers a number of "Tools for Leaders" to support leaders in bringing people together, running effective and efficient meetings, communicating with the public, dealing with conflict, welcoming diversity, setting action priorities, and strengthening other key skills.

The second section, “Advancing Community Projects,” shares ideas for action on specific topics drawn from the last 10 years of VCRD Community Visits, and compiles recommendations and priorities from the scores of Vermont communities we’ve been lucky enough to work with over the past couple of decades. This is not an abstract or theoretical list of recommendations. These are real action steps identified by thousands of Vermonters to advance projects in their communities, together with recommendations from Vermont resource providers and community and economic development experts.

As with the rest of the guide, these chapters are not meant to be comprehensive in their instructions. Instead, they offer a foundation for local leaders to use in structuring their thinking, and then provide a list of resources—both experts and funders—who can help to further local projects. We believe that nobody knows better the intricacies and particular issues facing a community than its residents, and we encourage local folks to grab the reins and use this tool as it is useful.

The guide concludes with a list of resources and opportunities to build skills in leadership. The work of community and economic reinvention is never done, and effective leaders are constantly adapting and growing to match the needs of the day.

To support the work of community leaders in Vermont, VCRD built “The Vermont Community Leadership Network” which can be accessed at vtrural.org/leadership. The network serves as a backbone for new, emerging and veteran community leaders throughout Vermont who want to share skills, provide peer support, engage in ongoing learning, and engage their communities for recovery, renewal and resilience. Network activities include regular on-line meetings, trainings, the sharing of successes, challenges and best practices, and the development of learning teams around particular themes or project arenas. We invite all who are interested in helping to create and lead efforts to advance their communities to participate, to share, and to commit together for a strong future in Vermont. Sign up today to keep in touch!

Best of luck to you in your community work. We commend you for the work you are about to do, and for all that you may have already done. We are here to help if we can. Please feel free to be in touch with us for advice, support, or to share stories of success. From all of us at VCRD, thank you for being on the line for your community, and helping us all move towards a vital and resilient future!

Tools for Community Leaders

Framing a Process for Public Engagement

Knowing how to encourage community involvement is a key leadership skill. Whether you're addressing a small neighborhood issue or creating a town-wide ten-year plan, most good participation shares key traits. Here are some of the critical elements to consider in framing your process.

Choose the most productive time and circumstances for engagement.

When will public engagement prove most valuable—both to leaders and participants? Your project is especially likely to merit comprehensive participation if *one or more* of these qualities apply:

It's early in the process. Setting goals, brainstorming ideas, choosing priorities, and other efforts that happens early in a project offer excellent opportunities for participation. People are likely to get frustrated if they're asked their opinion when it's too late to make a difference.

The project will affect many. How large is the group of people affected by your project, or who can have an impact on it? If it's a big or diverse group—or if you're still determining who will be affected—it makes sense to have an interactive process to consult these potential stakeholders.

The project is complex or controversial. Effective public engagement will help people grapple with values-based decisions, understand issues more fully, and comprehend necessary trade-offs. The project will benefit from the wide range of perspectives brought to light through a participatory process, which in turn will help generate valuable public ownership.

People sense that power has not been balanced. Public engagement is especially important when some groups have felt left out of previous decisions. You can improve trust by being open and transparent about the democratic process and clarifying people's access to decision-making authority and resources.

There's no community consensus. If the public has suspicion or concerns about your topic, or is simply uninformed, a well-structured engagement process can help. Working together, communities can agree on a course of action and move forward.

Know and communicate what you're asking the public for.

Some meetings are to present information; others are for open brainstorming; others make decisions about action. It is essential to know and share the purpose and boundaries of decision-making up front. Be able to describe your goal—*why* do you want public participation now? Then choose engagement tools that match your goal.

People get frustrated when they expect one thing but experience another. For instance, tempers flare if people come to a meeting to express their views, but discover it's an informational meeting with no public comment time. Likewise, people get annoyed if they come expecting information, but the meeting is designed to gather ideas and no one is available to answer questions. In both cases, participants would have been more satisfied if they had understood the purpose of the meeting before they came.

Public engagement is rarely one event; it's often a series of strategies. Each of the following goals is appropriate at different points in a community's process. Consider which one(s) are best for you, then choose the best tools.

| Your Goal | Possible Tools |
|--|---|
| Inform the public: Provide balanced information to help the public understand | Flyers and newsletters, websites, panel discussions, tabling at community events, open houses |
| Consult with the public: Solicit public comment on an issue or decision | Surveys (paper and online), focus groups, facilitated meetings designed for public comment |
| Involve the public: Work directly with the public throughout the effort, to ensure their ideas are understood and respected | Visioning exercises, deliberative forums with small-group discussions |
| Collaborate with the public: Partner with the community in developing alternatives and choosing actions | Advisory committees, participatory decision making, consensus meetings |
| Empower the public: The final decision is up to the community and the community owns the project or initiative | Town Meeting, ballot voting, or dot-voting and sign ups to advance projects |

Be realistic about your capacity.

Many public engagement techniques require facilitated public meetings. Be sure your local leadership has the facilitation skills necessary (see "Dealing with Differences" p.21 and "Facilitating in Demanding Moments" p.24), or that they get training. If the topic is controversial, it might be advisable to hire a professional facilitator.

Also, can you ensure you're welcoming the whole community? Is your meeting place handicapped accessible? Can you offer childcare? Are there language translation, transportation, timing, or other issues you can address to make your process open to all? (See "Recognizing Diversity and Advancing Equity and Inclusion" p.27).

Include everyone who cares.

Do your homework to identify people who might be affected by your project and include them all. Problem solving works better with a variety of perspectives, so include even those who might not support your project. Keep in mind those who have power or resources, those with information or expertise, and those who need what your project has to offer. (See "Inviting the Public" p.4)

Invite people into your planning early. Ideally, even your first planning meeting will be a mini version of the diverse representation you hope to achieve. You don't have to have the full plan in place before you invite participation—in fact, people are more likely to support and endorse this engagement process if they have had a hand in shaping it.

Communicate early, often, and openly about your efforts.

If you are an elected or officially appointed committee, abide by the Vermont Open Meeting Law's requirements on making agendas and minutes available, etc. (Consult your town office or the Vermont Secretary of State's office to find out more.) Informal groups may not be required to follow the same guidelines, but public engagement is more likely to succeed if you are consistently transparent in your organizing. (See "Communicating with the Community" p.7)

Listen, respect, and learn.

Leaders are sometimes tempted to skip the work of inclusive engagement. Why invite people who might not like your ideas or want to change your project? The reason is because they are likely to show up eventually; they can also add to your ideas and help build mutual ownership for a broader initiative and greater momentum. If people have not been included early, they are more likely to participate later with distrust, disruption, or opposition.

The secret ingredient in any public engagement is deep listening. Your success comes from your honesty, your authenticity, and the heart that you bring to drawing all voices together. Listening and modeling deep attention provides a foundation for mutual power, and a cornerstone for success in whatever project or issue is to be addressed.

Resources

The "Inform to Empower" list above is adapted from the **International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)** "spectrum of engagement" to help leaders think about engagement goals. Visit iap2usa.org/resources/Documents/Core%20Values%20Awards/IAP2%20-%20Spectrum%20-%20stand%20alone%20document.pdf. (Per Susan Clark, [requested permission to use](#)).

For more examples of public engagement techniques and matching them to your goals, see **National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD)**'s *Resource Guide on Public Engagement*. Visit ncdd.org/rc/pe-resource-guide.

Inviting the Public: Practical Tips

Inviting the public to take part in a process begins earlier than you might think. In fact, it's ideal to invite the community to take part in designing the process itself! This helps ensure that your efforts will appeal to a wide variety of folks. Here are a few tips for welcoming public participation.

Lead with a diverse team.

People will be more attracted to projects when they can “see” themselves represented among the organizers. Work to assemble a leadership/outreach team that's as diverse as your community. Some towns choose to create co-chair positions to make sure a project isn't perceived as led by a particular faction.

Are we all here?

At your first organizational meeting, look around the room and inquire of the group: “Are we all here?” With the idea that you'd like your group's efforts to represent the community as well as possible, brainstorm areas where you may want to fill out your ranks. Repeat this exercise at multiple meetings throughout your planning process, and give yourselves credit for growing inclusivity. (See “Recognizing Diversity and Advancing Equity and Inclusion” p.27). Areas needing balance might include:

- Gender
- Race and ethnicity
- Long-time residents and newcomers
- Geographic diversity (different part of town)
- Senior, middle-aged, teens and youth
- Socio-economic diversity
- Local businesses
- Immigrants and non-native English speakers
- Schools—staff, teachers, students
- Handicapped residents
- Religious and spiritual groups
- Civic groups and local clubs
- Elected/appointed local officials
- Farmers, foresters and loggers
- Hunting and sporting communities
- All lifestyles, including married, single, straight, LGBTQ
- Non-parents
- New parents, parents with school-age children
- Artists and craftspeople
- Non-profit groups
- Active and inactive citizens
- Homeless people
- Day and night-shift workers
- Computer/internet users and non-users

Plan specific outreach.

If you have identified groups that are not active in your process yet, but are important to its success, make a specific plan to approach them. Go around the circle and ask for volunteers: “Who knows someone (from this part of town/who's on that board/who is an artist...) you can ask to the next meeting?” At the next meeting, check on progress.

Make it personal (in a good way).

When inviting individuals, tell them why they will be especially helpful to the conversation. For example, “We could really use the perspective of young parents, and we hope you could help.”

Avoid “Token”-izing.

Unless they are the elected spokesperson for an organization, don’t ask anyone to speak for “their group” (e.g. don’t expect one youth member to know what all kids want). Try to get broad enough participation that no one is put on the spot.

Be clear what you’re asking.

People need to know what you’re asking them to commit to. If you’re publicizing one event, give the date, time, location, and purpose. If it’s a longer process, briefly describe the timeline and goal (for instance, a three-month planning process with two meetings per month, ending in a November vote). See “Framing a Process for Public Engagement” p.1.

Use multiple modes of communication.

Not everyone uses the same news source. Also, folks need to hear things several times for it to stick. (For more ideas, see “Communicating with the Community” p.7). Use a mix of tools, such as:

- Staff a table at community events (town meetings, concerts, sports events)
- Put up posters on bulletin boards (school, town hall, store, post office, cafe)
- Place handouts on the counter of local gathering spots (see above)
- Put up a sandwich board in higher-traffic intersections
- Get on the agenda of local boards/committees to keep them updated
- Visit existing groups (play group, book group, clubs) with your message
- Host an interactive event to highlight your project
- Create your own event website
- Mail postcards or flyer to all households
- Create a survey (use both print and online)
- Take advantage of word of mouth—which people are the best sources of juicy news in your town?
- Access existing media, such as:
 - Town website
 - Front Porch Forum
 - Facebook or other social media
 - School newsletters, and/or special flyers sent home with students
 - Church and club newsletters
 - Local newspaper
 - Commentaries or letters to the editor
 - Local radio and TV stations
 - Public access TV

Enlist community talent.

Local photographers, graphic designers, artists, web specialists, and others may be willing to volunteer talents toward your outreach. Consider interviewing retirees about their memories on the topic you're working on. Ask students to engage with your topic—for instance, host a poster contest, or ask students to envision your town's future regarding your topic area. People will be interested to see their neighbors' ideas.

Mix it up.

Not everything has to happen at a 7:00 pm Tuesday meeting. Consider field trips, family-friendly events, virtual online events, and other diverse options to make sure all feel welcome and included. People from different backgrounds and cultures communicate differently; some people will be able to express themselves best through small-group opportunities, visual presentations and hands-on opportunities, or via creative events such as storytelling or the arts.

Say thank you.

Appreciation can be shown in many ways—by providing food at meetings, by acknowledging efforts at meetings or in group communications, by celebrating milestones and successes. People are more likely to get involved and stay involved if they know their contribution is appreciated. Recognizing and praising civic commitment, volunteerism, and local democracy encourages and strengthens the community.

Communicating with the Community

Communication is never a one-time task—it's an ongoing part of moving projects forward. It does take effort. But local leaders who build communication into every step report that the investment pays off in greater public understanding, fresh ideas, and renewed volunteerism. Plus, projects are less likely to meet with time-consuming opposition, because residents know their views have been heard and incorporated.

Communication is a cycle.

Projects tend to move forward with a rhythm, and successful leaders take advantage of each point in the cycle to communicate about their efforts.

Invite: Use the beginning of a project to welcome public engagement through information and events (see “Inviting the Public” p.4).

Co-create vision and priorities: Use two-way communication to determine collaboratively where the community wants to go (see “Developing a Community Vision” p.10 and “Setting Priorities for Action” p.13).

Build public awareness and momentum: Use in-person, online, and other tools to keep the community up to date. Continually let people know where to find more information and how to get involved.

Share stories and celebrate successes: Don't wait for projects to be completed—offer regular updates on your achievements. Celebrate milestones, like when you receive a grant or break ground. Tell stories—one successful trailwork day, or how a whole family got involved. Choose diverse stories (youth, seniors, new residents, etc.) so that over time everyone can see themselves in a story.

Invite again: People will be drawn to these positive stories! So never miss an opportunity to communicate how new people can join in.

Communication goes two-ways: The Art of Listening

Half of communication is listening. When leaders listen effectively, they take in new information and opinions, and use them to improve public efforts. If you're a leader who listens, you tend to:

Show curiosity and ask questions. Listen to understand fully and ask for more information when you need it.

Relax into a listening posture. When a friend is really listening to you, how can you tell? Elements probably include eye contact, open posture, and receptive facial expressions.

Reflect back what you hear. Re-stating a speaker's opinion to be sure you understand it does not mean you have to agree with it; it only shows that you have heard it, and you respect their right to share it.

Record and share what you hear. Record the diversity of public comments at meetings for all to see (for instance, on a flip chart), and include them in meeting minutes.

Create public policy that reflects what you hear. Show how decisions include the input of the community. Even in conflicts where one side “wins” leaders can highlight the compromises and changes incorporated into the decision thanks to the minority view.

Communication takes multiple tools.

Ask around: Where do people get their news? Everyone tunes in to different sources. Also, most folks need to hear something more than once before it sinks in. So, to reach the broadest audience, use a mix of communication tools, such as:

One-to-one: Make sure a person (or multiple people) is available to answer questions, neighbor to neighbor. Make their phone number or email available for people who want to learn more from a real person.

Face-to-face: Set up an information table at community events (concerts, sports events) and speak directly with your neighbors. You can also periodically visit with clubs and ask to be on the agenda of local committee meetings, to update them about your project.

Posters and signs: Make color copies using eye-catching artwork by volunteer local artists, and post on bulletin boards around town. In addition, many towns have bought or built sandwich boards to place in front of the town office or at key town intersections.

Handouts: Communities have had success sending home flyers with schoolkids, and distributing them via clubs, business groups such as Rotary, and faith-based organizations. Consider making small flyers available on the counter wherever people stop in, like the general store, town clerk’s office, or café.

Mailings: Mailings are expensive, but a sure way to reach everyone in town. Postcards and bulk mailings are cheaper but often slower options. For flyers, find out if there is already a town mailing going out that you can piggy-back on. Sometimes you can find a business or organization to sponsor the mailing.

Surveys: Use a combination of online and printed surveys to discover more about community concerns. Be sure to report out your findings to help participants know they’ve been heard.

Events: Host events to highlight your work. Invite the community to learn more, and if possible offer hands-on opportunities for involvement (paint a mural, plant a tree). Offering children’s activities or displaying school projects related to your projects will bring in families.

Traditional Media: When you’d like your project to be covered by newspaper, radio or TV outlets, contact them directly. Give them the date, time, and location of your event or story, and be specific about why it would be of interest to their audience. You can also

submit commentaries or letters-to-the-editor, explore availability on public access stations, and submit event information to calendars. If you have the budget, consider placing ads.

Online and social media: Explore this ever-expanding universe. See below.

Communication is ever changing.

People's expectations about how leaders communicate have changed dramatically in the decades since the advent of the internet. Rather than waiting for information bulletins, voters expect ongoing transparency. Rather than accepting top-down decisions from leadership, they expect to be treated as partners.

Not all Vermonters have access to the internet, so always pair online communication with low-tech options. Still, making the most of online tools will enhance communication and community connections.

Websites: Post information about your work on the town website or create your own project site. Update it as regularly as possible. Publicize the web address on all your communications. Alternatively, some groups have chosen to use a Facebook page as an online "home" for projects.

Online bulletin boards: Front Porch Forum and other services collect posts from the community and email them directly to their inboxes. Post about your project regularly and include links to your website.

Listservs: Check whether groups in your community (PTO, conservation commission, etc.) have an email network you can use to get your message out.

Social media: Encourage your organizing team to spread the word about your project using their social media. Take advantage of Facebook, Instagram and other visual media by offering photogenic content such as hosting your event at an art installation or a scenic farm. To further publicize events, choose a hashtag and encourage organizers and participants to use it.

Communication takes patience.

Good communication creates slow, steady progress, but don't expect civic miracles. Even if people aren't flocking to your meetings, don't assume they don't hear you or don't care. By modeling the kind of engagement you hope to see, you are quietly strengthening a sense of community and reinforcing the message that participation is welcome. Over time, this builds trust and improves your town's civic culture.

Developing A Community Vision

All projects are easier when everyone is working toward a common vision. Although it takes time up-front, developing a shared vision can be an invaluable investment. Collaboration and creativity are more likely to flow and stumbling blocks are more easily overcome when there's a collective idea for the future. (In fact, planners suggest that towns define their vision at least once every five years.) There are many visioning techniques; here, we offer a basic strategy that has worked in many Vermont communities.

First, take stock: Is a vision needed?

Not every effort needs to begin with a vision process. How can you tell whether the time is right?

- Your community might benefit from a fresh vision statement if:
- Volunteerism is low and there's little energy for new projects
- Many people aren't aware of what's happening in town or how to engage
- You've been through a controversial time and need to bring people together
- Community members are excited to work together, but haven't agreed on priorities

You might not need to create a vision now if:

- The planning commission or other group has recently created a community vision statement, and people know about it
- Energy is clearly formed around a specific project or direction, and many people are ready to start working on it

Gather the community.

If you decide to move forward, gather the community for a 2-hour meeting. Remember, the most important element of a community vision is community—a vision statement will only have meaning if the community took the lead in creating it.

Give people plenty of time to hear about the process, and put out the meeting invitation to as broad and diverse group as possible. See "Inviting the Public" p.4.

A positive, confident local leader can lead the discussion, or you can hire a facilitator.

After welcoming the group and doing introductions, explain that:

- This process is intended to bring life, energy and new ideas
- There's no reason to get bogged down in details and wordsmithing—the goal is only to identify general points of vision for the future of the community, not specific projects (yet)
- This vision is not a binding document like the town plan, but a broader inspirational tool that you can revisit as needed

Brainstorm the qualities you'd most like to see.

Explain to the assembly that you'll now create a list of words, phrases or sentences that describe your community as you'd like to see it 10 years from now. (Or you can choose 5 years or 15 years—just make sure it's a time frame people can truly imagine.) Remind them:

- Don't worry about money or politics too much—this is positive, “blue sky” visioning
- There will be no critiquing responses—if someone disagrees with a suggestion, they can simply add a suggestion they think is more fitting, and you will include them all for consideration
- This is not a time for speeches—only a single sentence (at most) at a time
- People can add multiple suggestions, but be sure everyone has a turn

When the brainstorming begins, record everyone's suggestions on flip charts or projected screen in front of the room where everyone can see them. Ideally people will call out ideas one at a time, but if it becomes noisy, you can ask people to raise their hands and be called on. Be sure to record every suggestion.

As you go along, there may be pauses; be comfortable with silence, since people might be formulating their next ideas. If necessary, the facilitator can gently prompt for categories that may not have been mentioned yet. Have people described their vision for:

- Recreation?
- Heritage and historic buildings?
- Natural resources?
- Business and entrepreneurship?
- Social services?
- Minorities or marginalized populations?
- Education?
- The arts?
- Engaging seniors?
- Youth and family programs?
- Religious and spiritual connections?

When the facilitator feels most of the ideas have been voiced, ask if there are any last ideas before you move on. This may spur a few final suggestions.

Determine where there is broad agreement.

Not every participant will agree with every idea. Which suggestions have the broad support of the group? Ideally, you can find consensus on a variety of topics. For the most powerful vision, identify the concepts that have the endorsement of at least 2/3 of the group assembled.

You can use a variety of methods to determine support for vision points, including:

Method 1: End the meeting with a long list of brainstormed points. Make the list into a survey, and present it at a next meeting and/or distribute it widely to the community (using both a print and online version). Ask participants to check the points of vision that they feel comfortable including in a community vision statement, and to leave blank those that they don't agree should be included.

Method 2: Continue the meeting by writing each point of vision on a sheet of flipchart paper. Hand out a sheet of sticky dots to participants and ask them to place one dot on each of the statements they feel should be included in community vision. (Alternatively, you can hand out markers and have people vote by putting a check next to the statements.) Those that receive the most dots/checkmarks could be included while those that receive fewer dots will be left out of the final list. If using this method, a follow-up survey sent out broadly in the community (both print and online) could still be useful to include more voices.

Compile the vision.

Your statement may now be complete, or you might want to have a competent writer (or team) finalize it. However, do as little editing as possible—participants should be able to recognize their specific words and phrasing. Combine or clump ideas that are similar. Flowing sentences aren't critical; lists are fine.

Don't be afraid to have your vision statement reflect your community in all of its quirky uniqueness. It might be pointed, it might be directed and prescriptive, it might even be beautiful.

Make sure all participants receive a copy of the final vision statement, and put it to use. (See "Setting Priorities for Action" p.13). Your vision statement is a time capsule of the community's values, hopes and dreams. It could keep you going for years to come.

Here is a sample of a simple list of vision points collected in Brighton, VT and its village of Island Pond in 2016:

Brighton residents look to a future for the community where:

- ▶ Brighton is economically and environmentally sustainable.
- ▶ Brighton has a vibrant and compact downtown community surrounded by a rural and working landscape.
- ▶ The lake and water quality are protected into the future.
- ▶ There are a variety of ways to participate in the natural beauty that surrounds Island Pond. Residents take part in physical activities, such as hiking, that connect them to its natural assets.
- ▶ Brighton is family-oriented with activities and events that bring people of all ages to town.
- ▶ Brighton is a community that is well-connected with active and engaged citizens and community volunteers. Residents communicate with and support one another, and actively reach out and welcome new folks to town.
- ▶ Brighton residents have access to fresh and local fruits and vegetables.
- ▶ Youth are connected to the community and the school is a center point of community connection and engagement.
- ▶ The children know the history of Island Pond, and their connection to place helps them appreciate and protect it for the future.
- ▶ Brighton's community of writers, crafters, singers, and other artists contribute to a thriving art culture.
- ▶ Island Pond is a place of natural beauty and simplicity; a place we come home to.

Setting Priorities for Action

One of the most powerful experiences for any community is to turn a vision into action. While there are many methods to do this, the steps outlined below have helped many Vermont communities identify their top priorities.

It is critical that this work be led by an individual or team that has the trust of the community (not someone seen as pushing their own agenda). Several of these steps also require facilitation experience. Some communities are fortunate enough to have the leadership and expertise necessary within the community itself; for others, hiring a professional facilitator will be especially helpful for this effort.

Tip: Begin with a shared vision.

For a project to have the long-term support necessary to make it a reality, the whole community should feel ownership and connection. Perhaps your community is already prepared to work toward a common goal together. If not, one tool to foster a strong core of volunteers is a community visioning process. For information on how to do this, see “Developing a Community Vision” p.10.

Organize the community to brainstorm priorities.

Invite the whole community to a two-meeting process for identifying ideas and priorities for the future.

Set two meeting dates, approximately 2-4 weeks apart. Set the dates far enough in advance so you allow plenty of time for broad invitation to community members to participate in the process.

Be as inclusive as possible in inviting the public; see “Inviting the Public” p.4.

Be very specific about the purpose of this two-meeting process, including that it will focus on setting priorities for your community, and it will end with action groups who will build concrete plans to move forward.

Hold the first meeting: identify strengths, challenges and opportunities.

Welcome: Introduce event leaders and go over the meeting agenda. If your community has a vision document, have copies on hand and/or review it at the beginning of the gathering. Have a sign-in sheet so that you collect all participants’ names and contact information.

Strengths: Ask the group to brainstorm a list of the *strengths* of the community. Remind them that your community is unique, and your list can reflect the special personality of your town.

- Record the group’s ideas on flip charts or a projected screen in front of the room so that everyone can see the list. Be sure to write down all ideas. As you progress, don’t worry that there may be pauses while people gather their thoughts.
- Encourage the group to be creative. If needed, the facilitator can gently prompt for ideas that may not have come up yet, such as:
 - Physical resources like buildings and infrastructure
 - Mountains, swimming holes, and other natural features
 - Local businesses, entrepreneurs, artists
 - Governance elements such as active committees or town meeting
 - Social assets such as schools and health care
 - Cultural strengths such as a proud history, a strong sense of volunteerism and neighborliness, seasonal festivals

Challenges: Now use the same process to brainstorm a list of the community’s most pressing *challenges*. Every community has some issues they would like to address. Some may be recent or emerging challenges, some may be long-standing issues.

- Remind folks that this is not a time for speeches. Ideally this will be a list of single words or phrases.
- Likewise, this isn’t the time for debate. If a person disagrees with what’s listed on the board, they will get a chance to make their case during the follow-up discussion.

Anyone can offer multiple ideas, but be sure everyone has a turn.

Opportunities for Action: Finally, use the same process to brainstorm a list of ideas for action that the community might take to address the listed challenges or build on the assets. How might your community apply your unique strengths to deal with your most pressing challenges at this time?

- Remind participants that this is about ideas that *we*, as a community, can take on together—not things we wish the Selectboard or the legislature would do. This is all about local action that can be taken by volunteers in the community.
- At this point in the discussion, it can be tempting to go back to listing challenges. It is important that the facilitator keep the discussion on track and pointed towards action. If someone lists a challenge, ask, “What actions might we take to solve that problem or address that challenge?”
- Encourage people to think creatively. This is just a brainstorming discussion and nothing is set in stone. All ideas will be captured for future discussion.

Tip: If you have a big enough group, for this “Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities” step you could choose to break into subgroups by topic areas relevant to your community. Each subgroup would complete the brainstorming described above, then bring their “Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities” list back to the full group. Sample subgroups might include:

- Physical Infrastructure (buildings, roads, etc.)
- Education and Social Services
- Natural Resources and the Outdoors
- Local Economy
- Neighborliness and Connection
- Arts and Cultural Heritage

Coordinate between meetings.

The time between the two meetings is an active time for members of the organizing team, who now have several key tasks:

Distill lists into opportunities for potential action.

Carefully review the list of action ideas generated at the meeting. Pay attention to patterns that are emerging, and work to group similar items together into bigger picture topic areas. By the end of this step, you will have identified around 15-20 topics that a community task force might form around.

For example: One idea on the list may be focused on a new trail in the Town Forest. Another idea may be about youth bike programming and yet another about a path connecting the school to the Village Center with a bike path. You might suggest that a theme to “Advance Outdoor Recreation and Trails” seems to be emerging.

It can be challenging to look at diverse lists of ideas objectively and recognize the themes running through them. If you are using a professional facilitator, their help will be especially helpful for this step.

Continue community outreach.

In the time between the two meetings, you can also solicit action ideas from the community in other ways. These could include distributing a survey—ideally both on paper and online—available around town and via social media and local online forums. The survey will allow those who couldn’t attend the meeting to be involved and may generate additional interest in the second meeting.

Publicize.

Use the same inclusive outreach as the first meeting. In addition, use the contact information you collected from participants at the first meeting to remind them about the second meeting.

Hold the second meeting: set priorities.

Welcome

Have a sign-in sheet so that you collect all participants' names and contact information. Introduce event leaders and go over the meeting agenda. Briefly review what happened at the first meeting for those who could not attend.

Review opportunities.

Place a clean list of the 15-20 opportunities in front of the room. (It helps to have each on a separate flip chart sheet). Explain that these priorities have been distilled from the ideas the community generated in the previous weeks. Have participants review the list together—community members can take turns reading each idea aloud.

Ask the group: Are there any major ideas for action that were missed so far but should be included? This is not a time for discussion around which idea is best— this is a time to add any idea that people feel should have been captured that is not on the list.

Conduct first round of “Gut-Check” voting.

Once ideas have been read, distribute colored dot-stickers for voting. Hand out a predetermined number of dot-stickers to each participant. Voters can put their dots wherever they choose—spreading them across all of their priorities, or putting all of their dots on one top priority. Have volunteers tally up dot totals. Identify the top eight action ideas. Rewrite the top ideas on fresh flipchart sheets and bring back to the full group.

Champion priorities for action.

Once the top eight ideas are on the wall, give the group enough time (at least an hour) to have a facilitated discussion about which ideas should be prioritized. Ask the group to reflect on:

- Is this item actionable? Can it be successfully addressed?
- Is it already being addressed?
- Is it within the power of the community to take this on?
- Which idea is most important, and would have the most impact?

Have participants discuss which they feel are most worthy of rising to the top at this time. Encourage participants to step up and champion the ideas that they see as the most important opportunity for your community's future.

Combine—cautiously.

Participants may see opportunities to clump similar ideas together. In some cases, the ideas may be compatible (for instance, “start a farmers' market” and “create Community Supported Agriculture enterprises” might be merged under a new title, “Advance local food initiatives”). But resist the urge to over-combine. Projects need to be at a scale that is manageable and realistically actionable.

Prioritize the top projects.

Once the discussion winds down, distribute dot stickers again. Ask participants to vote by placing their dots on their top priorities for action.

Count the dots and choose the top vote-getters as priorities. The number of priority projects will vary by community and its scale. Think about your community's volunteer capacity to take on new projects, and decide the number in advance that will work for your town. Generally, 3-4 priorities seem to be a good number for a community to take on, but choose what works for you.

Tip: For a clearer picture of people's priorities, you can use weighted voting. For instance, each participant gets two red dots worth three points each, and four green dots worth one point each. The results can help you see where people's passion is strongest.

Create a task force for each project.

Congratulate the group on their hard work and celebrate the exciting action priorities they have chosen. Remind them that while the top priorities have been selected, it doesn't mean that the remaining projects won't ever happen. Notes from this meeting can be revisited in the future if the community is ready for additional projects.

Emphasize that each of these top-priority projects has proven it has the support of the community. These projects have momentum, and working together to make them a reality will be a rewarding experience.

Create a sign-up sheet on the wall or at a table near the exit for each of the top priorities. Ask people to sign up to serve on a task force to help implement this project. Have them include contact information for follow up.

Continue the momentum through task forces.

Get the word out about your events' success, and especially about the task force topics that were selected. Publicize the topic areas, upcoming meeting dates, and who to contact for more information on how to get involved. (See "Communicating with the Community" p.7).

Once task forces have been formed, be sure each group chooses a chair or co-chairs. The chair will take the lead on setting agendas, facilitating meetings, and helping shepherd the project forward. The chair should set the first meeting date, and communicate with the list of sign-ups to get started. (Task Force chairs may want to see "Managing Effective Meetings" p.18.)

Setting priorities will serve as a launching point for projects to advance your town's community, economy, and quality of life. Now the work begins to put ideas into action! Community-led projects take time and dedication, but you are not alone. Check out Part III of this guide for strategies to get started with your specific projects, and resources for support along the way.

Managing Effective Meetings

Whether you're a veteran leader or this is your first time at the helm, everyone wins when meetings are more efficient and transparent. Effective management not only makes meetings more productive. It also helps everyone feel respected, strengthens public trust, and even makes it easier to recruit and retain volunteers.

Publicize effectively.

Use a variety of methods to publicize the meeting. You might include mailings, bulletin boards, the town website and Front Porch Forum, newspapers and newsletters, and emails and phone calls. (Public bodies need to follow legal warning requirements, but these are rarely enough to inspire new involvement.) Make sure that all publicity materials include the *date, time, location, and purpose* of the gathering—you'd be surprised how often one of these gets left off! (See "Inviting the Public" p.4)

Set up the room to serve the purpose.

Make the room welcoming. In formal situations (town meetings, public hearings) you may want to place leaders in front of the room at a table, with the public facing them in rows. However, in most meetings it is unnecessary and can be intimidating. Instead, put chairs in a circle or V-shape, allowing participants to see and hear each other better. Or set up small tables if people will be working in small groups.

Make sure the room has adequate heat, air, and lighting. Offering simple refreshments (cider and cookies or fruit) will make people feel welcome and give them the energy to stay for the whole meeting. Have a sign-in sheet, and offer name tags if appropriate.

Define leadership roles.

Ideally, one person will chair the meeting and another person will take notes (minutes). You may also wish to assign a timekeeper to make sure you stay with the agenda. The same person doesn't have to play the same role every time, but make sure someone is ready to chair, and someone takes notes, at each meeting.

Welcome and introduce participants.

Start the meeting on time. Welcome people and remind them of the meeting's purpose. If the group isn't too big, have participants introduce themselves. Be specific—for instance, you can ask them to say their name, what road they live on, and a community connection that inspired them to come to the meeting. Go over the ground rules, if using them (see "Dealing With Differences" p.21).

Create agenda and minutes.

Draft a simple agenda before the meeting. Ideally, distribute it ahead of time and ask for additions. At the meeting, make sure everyone is familiar with it (hand out copies or post it on a flip chart).

The agenda usually begins with welcome and introductions, and a review of what happened at the last meeting. It should then include the following: topics to be addressed and by whom; time assigned to each topic; action needed (if necessary). You can ask at the beginning of the meeting whether anyone has agenda items to add.

The notes from a well-made agenda can be the basis of minutes from the meeting. And good minutes will give you a valuable roadmap for what needs to be included in the next meeting agenda.

Have an effective chair.

The person running the group—let's call them the chair—has special responsibilities. If you're the chair, here's some advice for you:

During the meeting:

Serve the entire group. Not a faction, not an interest, and especially not a self-interest. The chair works for everyone. Your first job is to be sure that there is a fair and productive dialogue.

Set the agenda. Not in your personal interest, but fairly representing all the ideas of the group.

Stay in charge. Manage the meeting to the agenda and timeline. (See "Facilitating in Demanding Moments" p.24)

Oversee all votes by accepted procedure. Maintain informal order at all times. The chair moderates, people should be recognized, interrupters should be gently asked to wait their turn. You can use a formal procedure such as Roberts Rules of Order when needed for official decision making.

Remain neutral while encouraging the expression of all sides of each issue. Help make sure everyone's opinions are heard, not just the vocal members.

Be aware of different communication styles. People may participate differently due to gender, age, class, race, or cultural norms. Be alert to these differences and work to help everyone be heard.

Recognize and respect unpopular opinions. Even if certain views are not widely supported, ensure that these perspectives are heard, respected, and recorded. They are valuable in understanding issues fully, and in framing future initiatives.

Be the listener for points of consensus, and highlight members' ideas that reinforce group unity.

Help group members make decisions and commitments

- Don't make decisions for the group. Instead, say "here's what I'm hearing, and here's one direction we could go. What do people think?"
- At the end of each agenda item ask "So, given all we've discussed, what are our action steps? Who will do what after the meeting?"
- Even if the steps are very small, there should be group buy-in. Create agreement that "these things will be done by these people" in the interest of the full group.

Make sure there is buy-in for the group's decisions and homework. Sum up commitments at the end of meetings. "Tom and Maria agreed to do ____ to move agenda item 3 forward.... Here's what I heard as other key points for our next meeting agenda. Does anyone have other items to add?"

Be a cheerleader by praising members of the committee and thanking people for doing their part. It is the chair's job to help people see that "we will succeed"—which can be a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Unite the group by helping each person feel valued, listened to, and important to the success of the project.

Set the next meeting date and make sure everyone knows when it is.

After the meeting:

Keep track of the work assigned so that you can ask for updates at the start of the next meeting (or at the appropriate point in the agenda for each update).

Communicate what happened. Using the same wide variety of tools used to publicize the meeting, plus the contact information you gathered on the sign-in sheet, make meeting notes available. You may even want to create a website or other online presence for your effort so people can always find agendas and minutes. (See "Communicating with the Community" p.7)

Speak for the group in public, if the group has given you this role. Not with your own opinions or plans, but on behalf of the consensus achieved. The chair makes the group's efforts visible, showcasing the good work done by the whole team going forward.

Dealing with Differences

Preparing for Challenging Meetings and Challenging Personalities

An important part of being a leader is helping people get along. Every community has its share of challenging personalities and differences of opinion, but this doesn't mean meetings have to be unpleasant. Here are some tips for making meetings civil and productive.

Before the Meeting

Offer clear and trustworthy communication.

If someone shows up at a meeting with a negative attitude, it is often because they don't trust the process. Make this less likely by committing early to open communication.

Be clear and consistent about the purpose of the group, when and where it's meeting, what it will do, and how people can stay informed and involved. (See "Framing a Process for Public Engagement" p.1)

Actively welcome the community into the process. (See "Inviting the Public" p.4)

Follow through between meetings with informative updates and make sure someone is available to respond to information requests. (See "Communicating with the Community" p.7).

Be sensitive to how your efforts might be received by people of different backgrounds (e.g. differences in income, education, race, place of origin) and strive to be inclusive. (See "Recognizing Diversity and Advancing Equity and Inclusion" p. 27).

Help people know what to expect.

Nothing makes people grumpier than finding out they came to the wrong meeting for the wrong reason. Clearly state the purpose of the meeting in all of your outreach to ensure everyone understands what will happen. Is this an informational meeting, where people are only expected to listen? A consultation, where people will express their opinions? A collaboration, where participants will work together on problems? A decision-making meeting, where participants have binding power? Any of these may be appropriate, as long as people know what to expect.

Bring a positive attitude.

Do something energizing before you attend the meeting. Whether it's running around with your kids, playing your favorite song, or enjoying a cup of coffee, it's helpful for you as a leader to arrive at the meeting feeling enthusiastic and positive.

At the Meeting

Establish ground rules.

When gathering a group for the first time or on a topic that may be controversial, suggest “ground rules” (or “community agreements”) for participation. Ground rules used commonly by many groups:

- Share the floor—everyone participates, no one dominates.
- Listen carefully to others, and remain open to ideas.
- Only one person talks at a time.
- Avoid personal attacks on people—focus on the issue.
- It’s okay to disagree, but do so respectfully.

Go over a list with the group at the beginning of the meeting and ask if anyone has any additions or changes. Now ask if everyone is willing to agree to go by these rules for this meeting. Post the rules in front of the room, and bring to subsequent meetings as a reminder. If meeting quality starts to deteriorate, you can remind the group of the rules they have agreed to.

Groups that meet on a regular basis may wish to add other ground rules, such as starting/ending on time, arriving prepared, not allowing phones/devices to distract from the meeting, limiting side conversations, “me then three” (wait for three other people to speak before you speak again), or other issues that crop up.

Model positive meeting behavior.

Every participant has a part in setting the tone. A positive presence can go a long way.

- Listen actively, with interest and curiosity about new ideas.
- Your face and body tell a story, so try to relax. Maintain a positive, attentive expression, and make eye contact with participants.
- Ask friendly clarifying questions to help people express themselves.
- Reflect back what you hear.

Be a good meeting facilitator.

A good meeting facilitator (who may also be the chair) helps everyone feel welcome, comfortable, and included. A facilitator should:

- Make sure everyone is familiar with the agenda.
- Involve everyone. Welcome a variety of opinions and balance the group’s participation.
- Be aware that people from different backgrounds and cultures communicate differently. If possible, offer a range of formats (small groups, one-on-one discussions, storytelling) so that all voices be heard in the manner that is most comfortable for them.
- Recognize all viewpoints (difficult, but especially vital, when you may disagree with the speaker).
- Listen actively, showing equal interest for everyone’s opinions.
- Only speak as much as absolutely necessary. You are there to serve the group, and the focus should be on the meeting topic, not on you.

- Welcome variety. Some of the best ideas come to light when seemingly different concepts come together.
- De-personalize issues. Once a person has proposed an idea, don't refer to it as "Bob's idea" but by topic ("the flowerbox suggestion.") Keep the focus on ideas, not individuals.
- Help the group come to consensus if possible, but if there is disagreement, record the range of opinions.
- Be aware of the group's energy. Watch for body language that may suggest the group needs a break, or is ready to move on to another topic.
- If the meeting is for idea generation, record the group's ideas on a flip chart or screen in front of the room. This helps people know they are being heard. Confirm with speakers that their ideas were recorded as they wish.
- Manage the process. Gently but firmly focus and re-focus the discussion to the agenda item. Don't let unproductive discussions continue.
- Keep the meeting on schedule, and ensure top-priority tasks are achieved.
- See "Facilitating in Demanding Moments" p.24 for additional suggestions.

Wrapping Up

Communicate, evaluate, appreciate.

- Close the meeting by summarizing what this meeting achieved, how participants' contributions will be used, and what comes next.
- Remind everyone of how to continue to stay involved and informed about with the group, including how they (and people who weren't there) can find notes from this gathering.
- Consider conducting a brief meeting evaluation to improve future meetings. This could be done as a quick group brainstorm on a flip chart, or by passing out a two-question survey asking:
 - The most effective/useful part of this meeting was _____ .
 - What I would change about future meetings would be: _____ .
- Thank everyone. Let them know that their time here was well spent and their participation is valued.

Facilitating in Demanding Moments

Every meeting has its moments, but with good facilitation, you can help smooth them out. Here are some challenging scenarios, and a variety of facilitator responses that can help the meeting get past the rough spot.

Someone is talking too much or keeps making the same point.

Often when people repeat themselves, it's because they don't feel understood. You don't have to agree with a person to make them know they have been heard. You can say, "You have strong feelings about this issue, and I want to be sure we have it on the record. Is this what you're saying?"

Record ideas on a flip chart or screen for all to see or designate a person in the room to scribe for the session. If someone keeps repeating themselves, point to the flip chart or the person scribing and say "I think we recorded that idea —let's make sure we have it right." Then ask the group to focus on new ideas to add to the list.

If one or two voices continue to dominate, you can set a rule that no individual can speak again until all those who want to speak on a subject have had a turn.

A participant says something that is unclear.

"Can you tell us that point again? I want to make sure we record correctly."

"Could you tell us more about that?"

"Can you give an example of how that might work?"

Someone is being disrespectful.

Begin the meetings with ground rules could be helpful to prevent disrespect (see "Dealing With Differences" p.21). Gently remind the group of the ground rules, and say "We knew these issues are important to everyone, and tempers may flare. That's why we adopted these rules—to keep us on track."

"We have limited time, and we'll succeed more quickly if we can put our personal differences aside and focus on the ideas we have in common."

"John, it sounds like you feel strongly about this. Can you tell us your top three priorities? Then we can look for the places we all have commonalities."

If necessary, take a break and speak with the person privately about how they can help keep the meeting civil.

Someone isn't participating at all.

"Walter, several other people have shared their concerns. Which of these is the most important to you?"

“Marie, given your experience as a (teacher, farmer...), what do you think?”

“It feels like there are some people in the room who haven’t had a chance to share their idea – is there anyone who hasn’t had a chance that wants to share an idea?”

The discussion is straying off topic.

“As a reminder, the question we’re discussing is X.”

“We need to re-focus on the topic, which is X. Let’s go around the circle have each person to offer one idea on the topic.”

Create one flip chart in the room labeled “bike rack” (or “other issues”) where you can record ideas that you don’t want to forget, but that aren’t on topic right now. Recording a person’s idea allows them to let go of it and return to the main topic. Be sure to include these “bike rack” ideas in the meeting minutes and come back to them at a future meeting.

The discussion is circular, repetitive, or negative.

Try to reframe the question. Rather than blame anyone, help the group take responsibility as a whole, by saying something like “We all agree on how frustrating this is. Now let’s move forward: what are some practical and positive actions we can take to make progress from here?”

“It seems like we’re starting to go around and around on this one. I’d like to ask only for comments at this point that are new to the discussion.”

People are having side conversations.

Be gentle but firm, saying “We all need to be on the same page, so let’s all remain part of one conversation until we break.”

“Tom, please hold off until you’re recognized by the chair so we can all benefit from what you’re thinking.”

If the room is large, the facilitator can physically move toward the people who are talking, which will draw attention to their part of the room and usually quiets them down.

People are dancing around the real issue.

Remind people of the fundamental reason for the meeting. Be provocative as needed. Participants are here to take a hard look at issues, and you can ask probing questions to help ideas go from “maybes” to decision points.

You’re running out of time.

Alert the group that you’ve almost used up the allotted agenda time for a topic and offer a suggestion. You can say, “We’re almost out of time. Are there a couple of us who are ready to take the lead on this, and report back to the group next time?”

“We’re getting close to a decision, but people have some points to make. Shall we agree to continue this discussion for another X minutes? It means we’ll adjust the agenda by X minutes elsewhere.” (For instance, move the final agenda item to the next meeting.)

Things really get out of hand.

Call a ten-minute break to allow people to cool down.

Consider hiring a professional facilitator for the next couple of meetings. An objective, skilled process professional can be just what’s needed to change a group’s dynamic.

You may wish to have group members get training in conflict resolution.

Tip: This list might make meetings sound difficult, but remember, you won’t see most of these problems at most meetings. Keep in mind that everyone is participating because they care. If you assume the best intentions in community members and model constructive leadership, it helps them to be their best selves.

Recognizing Diversity and Advancing Equity and Inclusion

The authentic involvement of everyone who will be affected by community decisions, plans, or initiatives is fundamental to their success. Reaching out, engaging, and empowering all community members to contribute to local processes fosters a deeper understanding of issues, a shared culture of trust and connection, and broad support. A wide sense of collective ownership builds community power and drives creative success. Engaging diversity and promoting equity and inclusion are crucial to building mutual ownership, and to ensuring impactful and enduring outcomes. This work is essential, and we all need to be part of it.

Success in this arena isn't just the absence of discrimination and inequity; it's about the presence of systems, supports, and strategies that advance equity and inclusion. Vermont's diversity is constantly changing. Our economic future depends on our ability to meet the needs of a rapidly growing multicultural marketplace. Our ability to thrive economically depends on our ability capture the imagination of visitors, entrepreneurs and investors from racially diverse populations beyond our borders to come here. Like many of us who were born somewhere else and staked our claim in Vermont, as we access more diverse marketplaces we increase the likelihood of individuals with more diverse backgrounds to also claim Vermont as home. The manner in which we welcome and include our new neighbours is going to be key to sustaining community and economic vitality in the coming decades.

Diversity

Diversity describes the difference in people's ethnicity, circumstances, backgrounds, and life experiences. The socioeconomic discrepancies between the wealthiest and least wealthy among us illustrate one area of great diversity in Vermont, while the fact that 93% of our population identifies as white illustrates another in which we are far less diverse, at least as compared to other states.

That being said, statistics can be deceiving. The above percentage fails to highlight the fact that over 33,000 local business owners, municipal officials, community volunteers, teachers, spiritual leaders, mentors, friends and other Vermonters identify as people of color. They contribute untold vitality, energy, expertise, skills, economic investment and leadership to the state. The same dynamic exists for individuals with disabilities, folks of non-binary gender, varying sexuality, and other marginalized populations. Recognizing and celebrating diversity is not always about scanning the distant horizon; it's also offering a hand in friendship to your neighbor.

Equity

We are all familiar with the concept of equality, the state of two or more things being exactly the same. That all people be given equal pay for doing the same work, that all individuals be afforded the same rights in our judicial system, or that all citizens have an equal right to vote are but a few examples of the principle of equality engrained in our values, but never fully realized.

Equity, on the other hand, acknowledges the inherent differences in people's life experiences, circumstances, and backgrounds. It recognizes the fact that we live in a culture that, consciously and unconsciously, systematically privileges some at the expense of others. Asking what different populations need to be successful, what barriers currently impede their success, what discrimination and unfairness they may face, and how local efforts can respond—these are the kinds of questions to incorporate into your local planning efforts. Having diverse representation in your team can help to identify some of these differing needs and flag potential equity issues as they occur. Having a team that reflects that desired diverse community is also a way of putting equity values into practice. As you work to organize any project, it is essential to pay attention, to look through an equity lens, to be sure you are listening and understanding the realities and needs of all members of your community.

Inclusion

Inclusion comes from actively seeking out people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives and bringing them into your community-building process. Opportunities for inclusion exist in all phases of a project and on all scales, from cultivating a diverse core team of partners to spearhead a project, to collecting input from the broader community in your community development work. Inclusion often means broadening one's outreach beyond traditional channels, or coming up with innovative solutions to reach populations across communication barriers.

Inclusion is about more than gathering input. It is also about extending opportunities for leadership and decision-making power to a diverse cross-section of the population. Often the most beneficial and long-lasting innovations occur when folks who have been historically marginalized are engaged in leadership from the outset of the project.

Reducing someone to a label defined by their difference from a majority group, then including them in a process just to be able to check the box, can itself be a process of marginalization. We all represent the various facets of our identity, and no single individual can entirely represent any group. Having someone on your team from a racial or ethnic minority can be incredibly valuable in helping broaden the group's perspective on certain issues, but expecting that individual to be the authority on the needs of the minority population to which they belong is unfair and misinformed.

Guiding Questions to Help Encourage Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Encouraging diversity, equity and inclusion requires us to continually ask sometimes difficult questions of ourselves and our working groups, and perpetually reevaluate opportunities for new input, direction and leadership. The following is by no means a comprehensive list, but is a starting point to help guide local efforts to include a broad range of individuals and perspectives.

- What is the makeup of our group with respect to the following categories: income, geography, education, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, political affiliation, faith, occupation, physical ability, criminal history, native language, and more?
- Who will be impacted by the issue that your initiative or project is working to address? Who will be affected by the outcome of your work? How might that impact or experience be felt differently by people of different incomes, race, ethnicity, geography?
- Are there individuals who could be invited into the process to help broaden the group's perspective? How might the process need to be altered to facilitate their meaningful inclusion?
- What accommodations might the group need to make to allow participation from a broader array of local community members? Are there implicit biases in the way the group operates that favor some people over others?
- Who ultimately makes the decisions for the group? Are there ways to distribute power among a broad set of stakeholders? Is the input of everyone within the group being valued equally?
- How is the group gathering input from the broader community about its action and direction? Are there populations that have not been consulted? What would need to be done to engage them?
- If successful, will the initiative benefit all members of the community equally? If not, why is it important to serve a particular group?
- What challenges to inclusion and trust exist on your team or in your community that may be barriers to authentic community involvement? How can you respond to build deeper and better engagement?
- Are there lessons to be learned from similar initiatives in the past? How can our shared history inform our vision for the future?

Additional Resources to Explore Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:

Like many other Vermont organizations, institutions, and individuals, at VCRD we are committed to learn and grow in this arena and to actively welcome the voice and leadership of historically marginalized and vulnerable populations. Fortunately, a number of individuals and organizations in Vermont are working tirelessly to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in our communities, workplaces, and institutions; many of them can offer expertise, training, resources, and support in this arena.

Xusana Davis is Vermont's first **Director of Racial Equity, State of Vermont**. Contact her at Xusana.davis@vermont.gov.

The **Roots Social Justice Center** provides physically and financially accessible space to support and bring together communities working for social justice. therootsjc.org.

Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity is a training and consulting service with the social mission of making Vermont a desirable destination for all, particularly outdoor enthusiasts, tourists, conventioners, college students, entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists of color. vermontpartnership.org.

Abundant Sun provides strategic planning to organizations on organizational culture and leadership and has deep expertise in DEI training and support for businesses and non-profits. <https://www.abundantsun.com/>.

The **Vermont Center for Independent Living** works to promote dignity, independence and the civil rights of Vermonters with disabilities. They can provide consultation around accessibility and practical assistance for interpreting and implementing the Americans with Disabilities Act and other Civil Rights laws. vcil.org.

CQ Strategies provides training and consultation to organizations, businesses, and individuals focused on equity, cultural proficiency, and social justice work. cqstrategies.org.

The **Association of Africans Living in Vermont** helps new Americans from all parts of the world gain independence in their new communities through a range of integration services bridging case management, workforce development, behavioral health awareness, and interpreter services programming. aalv-vt.org.

The **Clemmons Family Farm** in Charlotte is one of 17 (out of 7,000) farms in Vermont owned and operated by a family of color. They offer a number of programs forwarding a multi-cultural vision Vermont and that dive into the rich history of the African-American and African diaspora. clemmonsfamilyfarm.org

Budgeting and Fundraising

Some things don't cost money. But many community projects, from redeveloping old buildings to building community gardens or playgrounds, do. Developing a budget and a plan to raise funds may seem like a daunting task, but doing so in a way that engages fellow community members and evenly distributes the burden of the work can be an exciting and stimulating process that empowers the local community.

Define the Project and its Budget

Work with your committee or task force to clearly frame the work ahead. Do you need physical materials? What labor will be needed? How much work can be done by volunteers? What costs are fixed going into the project, and what will you need to estimate? Remember that a budget is a plan; it is the team's best estimation of the costs you will face to be successful. That plan can change with new information, with expenses that come in over or under projections, and with last minute additions. Given that reality, it is important not to let the perfect be the enemy of getting started.

Expenses

Start with the expense side. Let's say you are building a new playground:

- What will be the cost of the equipment you need to begin construction?
- The materials? What is the current rate for gravel, cement, steel, etc.?
- Transportation costs?
- Is there a need for preliminary excavation?
- Will you need to contract with experienced carpenters and welders? How much work can be done by volunteers?
- Are there costs associated with acquiring the land? Will any environmental analysis need to be conducted before construction begins?
- And so on...

You can see how for even a seemingly simple project the list of expenses can grow quickly! It can be helpful to connect with experienced professionals in validating your figures. Check with local suppliers on material costs, for instance, and always request formal estimates from potential contractors.

Once you have a handle on the expense side of the budget, you have a fund development goal.

Income

Calculating your potential income and comparing that with your budgeted expenses will help clarify whether the project is realistic and doable. The best question to help assess the potential funding landscape is “Who benefits, and who cares?” Think not only of the people in your community who care about the project today, but also of all those who *will* care when you communicate to them its importance, and give them a share in the leadership and ownership of the project.

One helpful lens through which to view the fund development process is to think of your resources in terms of three overlapping circles of support:

- The inner circle is you and your team of dedicated leaders. Maybe your families are in that circle too; maybe there are already a couple of others who are really behind the effort.
- In the second circle are people a little more distant from the project who might be interested and supportive but haven’t been asked to help yet.
- Lastly, in the largest, outer circle are the people, businesses, and local philanthropists who might be interested in supporting the project, but with whom more outreach and storytelling may be needed to cultivate their support.

The success of your project depends on people giving from all three circles, beginning with the innermost. That means you, your friends, and the “family” of caring people in the center of the project each give a little. It doesn’t have to be a lot of money—even if everyone just contributes a small amount, it will send the message that you’re all on board, and signals to the next circle that they should be too.

The second circle can be asked to contribute in any number of ways. You can organize a community potluck fundraiser, a bake sale, or musical event. Put a jar in the local store. Sell lottery tickets. Maybe most efficiently, you can always directly ask people to contribute; a short brochure outlining the project accompanied by a stamped envelope can be a great way make it easy for them to give. If you have the capacity, members of the committee can deliver in-person requests to individuals or businesses who might be willing to help.

To engage those people in the third circle, you may have to use a broad spectrum of communications channels—local traditional media partnerships, paper letters, community web pages, personalized emails, social media platforms, etc.—or you may decide to target your search towards a few key sponsors. Either way, the following are helpful guidelines when thinking about your pitch:

- People give to people.
- People give when asked by someone they know—the more personal the request, the better. If you send 1,000 emails asking for support, you might get 5 donations. 1,000 letters? Maybe 20. 1,000 phone calls? Maybe 300. Take all 1,000 people out to lunch, and by then end you might have 750 donations.

- It's important to acknowledge that some people have more resources to give than others. It's not offensive to ask each potential supporter to donate within their ability. In any fundraising process there is a pyramid of support:
 - At the bottom are the many people who care and can give small gifts. Their support is infinitely valuable; they are your foundation, and bring in the most by way of human capital.
 - Then, there are people in the middle tier whose support is fundamental. There may be only a tenth as many as in the bottom tier, but their total monetary contribution may exceed that group.
 - Lastly, at the top of the pyramid there are those who are able to make leadership contributions. For many projects, the lead donors may cover half the cost or more! Given this reality, as you approach fundraising for your community project it is important to consider local philanthropists who might be able to supply this level of financial support. Are there local individuals or business leaders that understand the value of the project and care enough to set an example?

Frame a plan that describes the ways you plan to ask for money, including names of the people, businesses, philanthropists or agencies that you will approach. Bring this plan to your working committee for review. Then, once you have agreed on any changes, figure out an equitable division of the labor. Sometimes it can be useful to conduct in-person visits in pairs, with one of you taking the lead on describing the project, and the other there to make the actual request.

A couple of thoughts on asking for money:

You are never begging—you are offering someone an opportunity to do something for the common good. That person benefits by contributing to the community and to something bigger than themselves. In a way, it's a little bit of immortality.

Always be respectful. Avoid making any judgement before or after the request, regardless of their decision. Any other attitude will hurt your effort and your relationships in the community.

When meeting a potential donor, share the story, ask for what you need (with businesses or larger donors it's best to actually give them a dollar figure), and then be quiet. Don't try to describe all the reasons the donor might not want to give. Relax. Give them time to share their thoughts or advice on your project, and to consider what they can and want to do. Don't leave without asking, though; and before you leave, be sure you understand what they will commit to.

Mock Playground Budget

As an example, let's look at what a budget for building a playground might look like.

EXPENSES

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Excavation and Leveling the Ground | 5,000 |
| Plastic Play Structures | 22,000 |
| Gazebo Wood and Materials | 8,000 |
| Carpentry (150 hours at \$32/hr.) | 4,600 |
| Trees, Bushes and Grass Seed | 2,000 |
| Total Expenses | \$41,600 |

INCOME

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Small donations (under \$100) | 6,000 |
| Business Contributions | 14,000 |
| Grants | 10,000 |
| Leadership Donor | 10,000 |
| Barbeque Fundraiser | 1,600 |
| Total Income | \$41,600 |

The income side of your budget sets categorical funding targets for you to work towards. When you and your team look at a budget like this, you may get ideas: Is there a garden store in town that might contribute the trees and bushes? Is there a farmer with a backhoe who might do the excavation as a contribution?

Be confident. Budgeting and fundraising have built great things all around you. People will be glad to be a part of your project.

And to the most important question of who benefits and who cares? In the above example, the children in your community are the ones that benefit, and so *everyone* cares. Be proud to ask for their partnership and support!

Using Virtual Collaboration Tools

For better or for worse, digital tools are everywhere. Many Vermont communities still face hurdles in accessing affordable, high-speed internet, but even current levels of service are often adequate to allow for online convening. Whether you want to limit in-person meetings, minimize travel time and expense, or engage with partners from far-off corners of the state, virtual tools can help you connect with your team. Done right, they can even improve communication, efficiency, and collaboration.

Online Meetings

Let's face it, online meetings take some getting used to. There is something about handshakes and eye-contact that is nearly impossible to emulate in an online setting. That being said, the global Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 brought into sharp focus the necessity of conducting virtual meetings. Like all tools, online platforms have their upsides and downsides.

Advantages

Online meetings can include participants who cannot or would prefer not to make the trip to a public meeting in person. Older adults, individuals with physical disabilities, and folks living in remote locations may face fewer barriers to participate when a meeting is virtual.

Online meetings often feature modes and functions that are not available in a traditional setting. Platforms with a chat function, for instance, allow participants to post their thoughts or link to resources without interrupting the main speaker. This is also a visible but unobtrusive way to add talking points for later in the conversation. Likewise, many online meeting platforms allow hosts to record video or audio from the meeting, which can be made accessible to those unable to join at the scheduled time.

Online meetings can constructively change the way different personalities interact. It can be much easier, for instance, for less outspoken individuals or those on the autism spectrum to speak their minds when there are more formal structures established dictating appropriate times to talk.

Convening online saves the time and cost of travel to and from in-person meetings.

Drawbacks

Access and connectivity to internet-capable devices is mixed across the state. In addition, skill and comfort levels with technology can present a barrier. Since not everyone may be able to participate in an online convening, it is critical to make alternatives available (e.g. phone call-in option).

For those who do have access to the internet, levels of service can vary widely. Nothing is worse than having your router reboot when you are in the middle of giving an important presentation.

Some platforms require a monthly fee or charge to unlock certain features. Fortunately, there are many free options available, and most paid platforms offer a basic account that is within the budget of most local groups.

Online meetings can be more fatiguing than in-person meetings. Micro-delays, screen-freezes and other tech glitches cause strain. In addition, although we can see each other, we miss out on the eye contact, non-verbal cues and body language that humans count on, often making communication more stressful and less complete.

Tips for Hosting Effective Online Meetings

In many ways, discussions conducted online are similar to in-person meetings, and much of the same guidance applies. (See “Managing Effective Meetings” p.18 as well as “Dealing with Differences” p.21 and “Facilitating in Demanding Moments” p.24). However, some additional strategies can improve the online meeting experience.

- Prepare and test your system ahead of time. Make sure discussion leaders are familiar with the online meeting platform, and that someone is available to help others join and troubleshoot any challenges that come up. Do a test-run to make sure you understand all of the functions and features of the system you are using.
- If participants are new to the format, assume that the first 5-10 minutes of the meeting may be focused on getting everyone connected, and build that into the agenda.
- Offer an offline alternative so that those who do not have internet can participate; for instance, include a phone call-in option in addition to video-conferencing.
- Create a clear agenda and share it ahead of time. Design the agenda knowing that the focus required for virtual meetings can be more exhausting than that of in-person meetings. This may mean making the agenda shorter, and including breaks.
- Appoint a meeting facilitator to lead the discussion and designate people to fill specific roles including monitoring the meeting chat (if used), troubleshooting any technical issues, and taking meeting minutes.
- In-person meetings allow people to shake hands, discuss the weather, and otherwise make human contact as the meeting begins. As a replacement, you can build in a brief round of introductions or check-ins at the beginning of the meeting as appropriate.
- If you expect participants to use specific tools (e.g. the chat function or the raised-hand function), go over them at the beginning of the meeting.
- Agree on meeting ground rules (see “Managing Effective Meetings” p.18), adding ground rules specific to online meetings as necessary. Depending on the size and familiarity of your group, additional ground rules might include:
 - Mute yourself except when you are speaking, to minimize background noise
 - Focus on the meeting and avoid multitasking
 - People participating by voice-only should identify themselves each time they speak
 - Use the highest quality option available to you (e.g. avoid speakerphone if possible).
 - When facilitating, allow time for everyone to chime in, recognizing that there may be slight delays. To shorten pauses, the facilitator may be more directive than at an in-person meeting, for instance by calling on people by name. If one or two people seem to be dominating the discussion, invite those who have been quieter to share their ideas.

Platforms

There are many virtual meeting platforms on the market; which one you choose may depend on security concerns, affordability, or simply personal preference. The following is not a comprehensive list, but gives an overview of some of the tools with which we at VCRD have had some experience, or which we know communities are using effectively.

Zoom

Popular with many businesses, organizations, and individuals for its user-friendly interface and free or relatively low price-point, this online meeting service has the advantage of not requiring participants make an account, only that they click a link or dial-in by phone. As a host, you schedule meetings ahead of time, and are able to send out an invitation by email to participants. Zoom integrates easily with most digital calendars. The free version of the software allows one-on-one meetings of unlimited length, and meetings of more than two people for up to 45 minutes. To be able to host meetings longer than that, you have to enroll with a monthly charge for their basic plan.

Zoom offers a number of different functions, including breakout rooms, the ability to share screens, and a polling function. Many users have reported that for large meetings, the Zoom option that allows you to see all participants at the same time (Gallery View) is particularly useful.

Google Hangouts

For folks who already have a Gmail account, Google Hangouts can be a quick and easy way to collaborate. This integrated platform allows video, audio, and chat between two or more Google account holders at no cost. You can access Google Hangouts directly from a Gmail Account, or from its own dedicated website.

Skype

Free as long as all users have an account, Skype allows for video calls between individuals and groups. You can also pre-pay an amount of your choosing to be able to call directly from your computer to a phone line, and there is an easy way to set up a local phone number tied to your account so that folks are able to call you back.

GoToMeeting

Similar in functionality to Zoom, GoToMeeting allows a host to set up virtual convenings in advance, and participants join by clicking a link.

Online Collaboration

Sometimes a meeting is the most efficient way to move a project forward, but as anyone who has ever tried to wordsmith a document in a large committee can attest, that is not always the case. Just as certain tasks are best delegated to members of the group as “homework,” a number of online collaborative tools can help you advance projects outside of a virtual meeting.

Platforms

This is by no means a comprehensive list, but the following are tools VCRD has found to be particularly handy in fostering online collaboration:

Google Suite

This collection of online tools can be invaluable for remote collaboration. Including Google Docs (<https://www.google.com/docs/about/>), Google Sheets (<https://www.google.com/sheets/about/>), and a number of other tools which mirror the Microsoft Office programs (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc.), these tools allow multiple users to work in the same document simultaneously while continually saving their progress. The documents produced can easily be shared by link, which avoids long downloads and can help avoid version confusion. The creator of each document can adjust the sharing settings to allow specifically invited collaborators or the general public to either view or edit the work. Google Drive (<https://www.google.com/drive/>) allows you to establish a folder structure similar to that on your home computer to store and organize e documents you have created. These folders may themselves be shared with collaborators, and linked to within documents and other communications.

DropBox

If you're looking for something with a similar functionality to Google Drive, but that more closely mirrors the folder architecture of a traditional computer, Dropbox can be a useful option. This software allows you to share documents of multiple types to a common team folder (or structure of folders) and saves new drafts as they are edited. You can access either through an online portal or by downloading a desktop client which seamlessly integrates into your computer's existing folder architecture. More advanced features are available for businesses, though they come with a monthly price-tag.

Slack

Slack combines many of the functionalities of the tools above by providing a central dashboard in which you can set up and monitor multiple conversation channels based on topic. For example, say you are developing a new teen center in your town. You could set up one channel to discuss the zoning and regulatory logistics of the project, another to talk about fundraising, another for public outreach, and another to track general progress. You could invite different collaborators to participate in different channels, and within each channel have the option to share documents, host video calls, and communicate by chat. The software is free, though it requires each user make an account. It is accessible through an online portal or through a downloadable desktop client.

A Note on Privacy & Data Collection

All of the tools described above are provided by third-party, in many cases large, multinational corporations. Each come with fairly explicit (and lengthy) Terms of Service agreements, buried in which can be all kinds of special provisions allowing the parent company the right to retain certain data. One reality of our evolving digital economy is that data of any kind, personal, professional or otherwise, have taken on a value of their own.

Many individuals, justifiably concerned with their right to privacy, may avoid the use of online tools entirely in favor of the anonymity of traditional meetings. However, in instances such as the global Coronavirus pandemic of 2020, traditional meetings are not an option. In other cases, the advantages—accessibility, convenience, ability to span geography—may outweigh privacy concerns. Ultimately, the degree to which you decide to use virtual collaboration tools will depend on the balancing of all of these factors. We present them in this chapter as one tool of many to be used in your community organizing work, and trust to the discretion and common sense of Vermonters to choose what works best for you and your team.

Advancing Community Projects Action Steps & Resources

This section of the Community Leadership Guide is designed as a how-to manual for local leaders who are working to advance specific projects in their communities. VCRD evaluated the priorities of scores of community development engagements over the last 10-20 years to build a list of the priority projects that communities and local leaders have initiated and accomplished. For each of these potential projects we have pulled together the actual actions steps and resources that we've seen communities use, and the best advice of all our community and economic development partners at the state, federal, non-profit and private sector. We recognize that every community is different, though, and share these platforms not as the final formula, but as starting points for action that local leaders can use or adapt to fit their local circumstances and the decisions of their team.

Develop an Agricultural Network

Vermonters consistently list working farms as one of the top assets they appreciate about our state. One the most effective ways communities have discovered to support farmers is to work with them to organize networks and share resources. Here are some of the steps Vermont communities have taken to create and support agricultural networks.

Action Steps

1. Build a team and gather information.

Reach out to farmers and the community to convene an action committee. Recruit broadly, thinking not only of farmers and producers, but people who want to support agriculture in your community like families, gardeners, schools, and farm-related businesses. (For tips on reaching out, see “Inviting the Public” p.4). Together, your team can gather information to inform its networking efforts. Your research might include:

- Developing a comprehensive directory of farmers and producers in the area.
- Surveying farmers’ and producers needs and interest in coming together. Their networking interests may include regular gatherings, educational opportunities, tool and skill sharing, market development, branding and co-distributing, and more (see list below).
- Surveying the public to identify their interests in agriculture and how they could contribute and how the network might serve them.

2. Develop the network.

Based on producer feedback, determine your group’s priorities and develop an organizing and communications plan for the network.

- Work with team to agree on goals, priorities, and key projects. (See “Setting Priorities for Action” p.13).
- Determine a regular meeting schedule for the group.
- Create a way to regularly communicate with producers and/or the public. Consider options such as Facebook Group, list serve email, website, or newsletter.

3. Implement Your Priority Projects

Analyze responses from producer and community surveys, then engage with regional and statewide partners as your network team works to build an action plan.

Priorities for action will vary from place to place. A variety of steps that have proven valuable in Vermont communities is listed below. Which might be most useful to the farmers in your area?

- Services and Support for Farmers and Producers
- Workshops for farmers from outside experts
- Peer learning opportunities—farmers teaching farmers
- Farmer/producer social gatherings

- Cooperative equipment-sharing or purchasing
- Coordinated trucks carrying product to larger markets (like Burlington, Montreal, Boston)
- Collective local or regional branding and marketing
- Developing or coordinating slaughter/butcher facilities
- On-farm energy efficiency and power generation
- Bulk purchasing of fuel
- Shared “Food Hub” for storage and production
- Land use arrangements that connect landowners with land stewards who share similar management values and goals
- Support for legacy farmers to create their transition/succession plans
- Inventory of land to assess the amount and location of underutilized farmland, and a system to connect new and young farmers to land
- Community Engagement, Partnership, and Education
- Launching of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) or Cooperative Farm Stand
- Initiation of a local farmers market
- Connecting across food service providers in schools and other institutions in support of using local foods
- Community work days on farms
- Social events and community dinners at farms
- Weekly or monthly events, similar to Feast and Field or Summervale, with music, food and art

4. Communicate, Share, and Celebrate

Agriculture is important to Vermonters, and your community will want to hear about your work. Spreading the word about your efforts will build enthusiasm and volunteer energy. Use a variety of tools including traditional outreach, celebratory events, and social media. (See “Communicating with the Community” p.7).

Resources

People Who Can Help

The **Center for an Agricultural Economy** is a model of a Food Hub that is deeply connected to the community and connects producers across the region. Contact Jon Ramsay, Executive Director at jon@hardwickagriculture.org, or 472-5362 x209. Visit hardwickagriculture.org.

Vital Communities hosts Valley Food and Farm and could share their experience connecting producers and the community. Contact Nancy LaRowe at nancy@vitalcommunities.org, or 291-9100 x106. Visit vitalcommunities.org/valleyfoodfarm.

Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund hosts the Farm to Plate Network which is a statewide food and agricultural network. Contact Jake Claro at jake@vsjf.org, or 828-5669. Visit vsjf.org.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food & Markets could help with many aspects of an agricultural network and local market development. Contact Abbey Willard, Local Foods Administrator, at abbey.willard@vermont.gov, or 272-2885. Visit agriculture.vermont.gov.

The University of Vermont Extension could be a partner in helping to identify and implement agricultural support and community connection. Contact Linda Berlin, Director of the UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture at linda.berlin@uvm.edu or 656-0669.

Funding

USDA Rural Development (USDA-RD) has grants that could support community facilities and infrastructure or programs/initiatives that support rural economic development. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

Vermont Community Foundation (VCF) offers a couple of agriculture-related grant opportunities.

- Farm & Food Initiative: vermontcf.org/CommunityImpact/FoodandFarmInitiative.aspx
- High Meadows Fund: vermontcf.org/CommunityImpact/HighMeadowsFund.aspx

VT Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets

- agriculture.vermont.gov/grants
- Working Lands Fund: workinglands.vermont.gov

The New England Grassroots Environmental Fund could provide small seed grants to help the group get started: grassrootsfund.org/dollars.

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. You can search the **Vermont Foundations Directory** using keywords like “working lands” “agriculture” “food access” or other words that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area. Find the database here: <https://fdovermont.foundationcenter.org/>.

Town Initiatives and Existing Agricultural Networks

Organic Valley’s CROPP Cooperative functions as a network for dairy farmers that provides marketing, as well as diverse support and technical assistance. Contact: John Cleary at john.cleary@organicvalley.coop or visit farmers.coop.

Addison County Relocalization Network (ACORN): Visit acornvt.org.

Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance: Contact Paul Doton at pdoton@gmail.com. Visit crwfa.org.

Vermont Grass Farmers Association: Contact Meghan Sheradin at meghan@vtgrassfarmers.org. Visit vtgrassfarmers.org.

Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition: Visit champlainvalleyfarmercoalition.com

Greater Cabot Working Landscape Network: Visit facebook.com/greatercabotworkinglandscapenetwork.

Vermont Farm to Plate Network: Visit vtfarmtoplate.com/network.

Guides and Other Resources

The **National Good Food Network** from the Wallace Center at Winrock International creates diverse, high quality resources including webinars. Recent webinar topics include Local Food in Retail: Two Models, One Goal; and Food Hubs: Viable Regional Distribution Solutions ngfn.org.

Boost the Arts and the Creative Economy

Vermonters value the arts. Given art's critical position in education and human development, its role in strengthening a sense of connection, and its function in economic development, technology and tourism, many Vermonters view the arts and creative economy as central to our communities.

Action Steps

1. Create an arts or creative economy team.

Put the word out that an arts committee is being formed. Invite and convene a working group of local leaders and community members focused on fostering and promoting the arts and the local creative economy. Include local artists and craftspeople, as well as business leaders, educators, youth, and other community leaders who could help with communications, event planning, and meeting coordination. For tips, see "Inviting the Public" p.4.

Connect with other arts committees and councils around the state to learn about how they got started, and collect tips and strategies as the group develops an action plan. The Vermont Arts Council could also help guide the work and planning.

Work with the committee to agree on your group's vision and role. For process tips, see "Developing a Community Vision" p.10.

2. Research community interests, needs, and assets.

Create an inventory or "asset map" of local arts resources and allies. Who is active in creative pursuits in your community? Ask them about their work, their views on the needs of local artists and craftspeople, and what they view as opportunities for growth in the creative economy. Include individuals and groups such as:

- Artists and craftspeople
- Schools, educators, and youth
- Faith groups
- Businesses and entrepreneurs
- Conservation groups
- Social or civic organizations
- Recreation Programs
- Libraries, youth and senior centers, and other community institutions

Survey the community. Distribute a public survey (ideally both paper and online) to gather ideas about your group's potential direction and activities.

Network and coordinate with other state and local humanities/arts councils and committees. Visit successful arts programs in other communities. Learn from their successes, and make sure you will be supporting, rather than duplicating, each other's efforts.

3. Formulate and implement an action plan.

Based on community feedback, develop an overall mission statement, and set goals and priorities for the committee. (See “Setting Priorities for Action” p.13).

Implement your plan. Based on your mission statement and priorities, begin to develop programming and events to boost the arts and the creative economy in your town or region. Start small with artist gatherings and other events, and slowly build to include more events and programs and connect to more artists and community members.

Looking for inspiration? Some of the initiatives that Vermont’s community-based arts committees have taken on include:

- Creating a Community Arts Calendar to serve as a clearinghouse for local events and performances.
- Hosting a signature Arts Council event to be held regularly (dinner event, seasonal celebration, etc.). This helps increase organizational visibility. It could be a fundraiser (optional).
- Inventorying existing unused spaces for potential pop-up or permanent arts spaces. Leverage people and resources from your asset map to find ways to creatively use these spaces.
- Holding an open studio weekend for local artists.
- Partnering with local schools to create a Youth Arts adjunct to your group, to encourage creative works by students for students.
- Creating a musical instrument loan program.
- Creating public art projects, both temporary and permanent, including statues, murals, sidewalk art, traffic safety signage, and more.

4. Communicate, celebrate, and reflect.

Keeping the community informed about your efforts will increase participation and bring in new volunteers. Celebrate each art project as a success, and treat it as an opportunity to inform the community about your work. Artistic projects often offer outstanding visuals that stand out in both traditional and social media—use them to your advantage. For outreach ideas, see “Communicating with the Community” p.7.

Take time with your team to reflect on your efforts. What’s working? What’s not? Have the needs of the community changed? Work with your team to evaluate and improve on your efforts.

Resources

People Who Can Help

The Vermont Arts Council expands arts opportunities and energizes the creative economy through their grant-making work, “Creative Network,” and other programs. Contact Karen Mittelman, Executive Director, at kmittelman@vermontartscouncil.org, or 828-5422. Visit vermontartscouncil.org.

Creative Ground is a directory for artists and creative businesses across New England. Visit www.creativeground.org.

The Young Writers Project is a Vermont-based organization that seeks to support, mentor, promote and publish young writers primarily between the ages of 13-19. Contact Executive Director Susan Reid at sreid@youngwritersproject.org, or 324-9538. Visit youngwritersproject.org.

A River of Light in Waterbury is an annual lantern parade that has been running since 2010, and is a great example of a signature event for a local arts organization. For more information, contact MK Monley at mmonley@huusd.org. Visit ariveroflightinwaterbury.org.

Other Vermont groups engaged in community-level arts projects, showing, events, and development:

- **The Memphramagog Artists Collaborative** in Newport runs a cooperative gallery. Call 334-1966, or visit maccenterforhearts.com.
- **The Connecticut River Artisans Guild (CRAG)** in Canaan runs events, classes, and pop-up galleries. Visit connecticutriverartisans.com.
- **The Art House** in Craftsbury runs community classes in multiple media and runs a small gallery and craft shop. They have also starting holding concerts and dances. Call 586-2200.
- **BarnArts** in Barnard coordinates a year-round performing and visual arts program of workshops for adults and youth, exhibitions and performances, showcasing existing local talent and bringing in nationally recognized artists. Call 234-1645, or visit barnarts.org.
- **River Arts** in Morrisville is a multi-generational community arts organization that runs programming for youth and older adults. It hosts events and maintains two galleries. Call 888-1261, or visit riverartsvt.org.
- **Island Arts** is an arts group in North Hero that has been around for 30 years. Contact Katya Wilcox, President, at info@islandarts.org, or 233-1725.
- **The Champlain Islands Artists Organization** is a group for artists and crafters. Visit ciaovt.org.
- **Burlington City Arts** may be a resource for advice in promoting the arts, and be able to provide insights on building a community coalition. Call 865-7166.
- **Catamount Arts** in St Johnsbury serves a rural and relatively low-income community with a successful community arts model that also partners with school districts and colleges to put on events and programs for the community. Contact Jody Fried, Executive Director, at jfried@catamountarts.org or 748-2600. Visit catamountarts.org.

Funding

The Vermont Arts Council offers a number of grants to organizations that support the arts and creative economies in their local communities. Contact Karen Mittelman, Executive Director, at kmittelman@vermontartscouncil.org, or 828-5422. Visit vermontartscouncil.org.

USDA Rural Development offers a number of grants for communities and non-profits. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

The Vermont Community Foundation could be a funding source for certain arts-focused projects. Visit vermontcf.org, or contact:

- Sarah Waring at swaring@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x283.
- Kevin Wiberg – Spark Community Grants. kwiberg@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x284.

The Ben & Jerry's Foundation offers a number of grant programs for Vermont organizations. Visit www.benandjerrysfoundation.org.

The National Endowment for the Arts offers a number of grant opportunities for individuals and organizations to promote the arts. Visit arts.gov.

Improve Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility

Some communities are inspired to create sustainable transportation alternatives; others are seeking a tourism boost; and many want to improve recreation opportunities and livability for community members all ages. Whatever the reason, Vermont communities are increasingly identifying bicycle and pedestrian safety as a top priority. Some of the action steps that have proven useful in Vermont communities are listed below. Which ones might be right for your community?

Action Steps

1. Gather a team.

Identify and recruit community members interested in bike and pedestrian safety. Think broadly, including health and outdoor recreation enthusiasts, those interested in business and tourism, alternative energy supporters, families, youth, seniors, and others.

Review needs with local leadership (Select Board/City Council, planning commission, trails and recreation committee) as well as regional and statewide experts (see “Resources” below). Consult with existing non-profits and clubs that might share your interests.

Work with participants to agree on the group’s goals and purpose.

2. Research assets, needs, and opportunities.

Inventory and map existing bike and pedestrian resources including:

- Parks and recreational facilities
- Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure (bike paths, sidewalks, pedestrian bridges etc.)
- Existing municipal parking
- Vacant properties that could be used to expand bike/pedestrian infrastructure

Inventory gaps in bike and pedestrian infrastructure. What is missing? What could be improved?

Conduct a community survey to gather residents’ ideas about the town’s future streetscape. Design questions to gauge interest in biking and walking options. Are residents more interested in options for transit, recreation or both?

Review your town plan. Does the transportation chapter already identify bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure as a priority? If so, does it offer any guidance about location, or resources to support improvements?

Contact the Vermont Agency of Transportation to identify any work they have done in your community and whether they could visit the community to help to identify current assets and needs.

Contact your area Regional Planning Commission (RPC) for assistance locating recent studies or plans that are relevant to your effort. The RPC could also:

- Help identify which new information would be most useful to develop a picture of the needs in the community, and guide the design of a study.
- Help conduct necessary traffic, parking, or other studies for your town. Where are there safety and traffic concerns? Are there crosswalks needed? Where? You may need to recruit community volunteers to help carry out key studies.

3. Create a bicycle and pedestrian plan.

Based on your research about your community's interests, assets and needs, build an action plan and timeline for your group's priorities. For process tools, see "Setting Priorities for Action" p.13.

If large-scale improvements are needed, and/or if your town does not have a plan to address bike/pedestrian safety, you could work with the Regional Planning Commission to develop a comprehensive master plan for bicycle and pedestrian safety and traffic calming.

Other efforts may be smaller scale, to address key problem areas or improvements. Strategies that have been explored and implemented in communities across VT include:

- "Pop-up" demonstrations to test and model ideas for improvements to streetscape, traffic calming, crosswalks, parking, pedestrian paths, and more.
- Crosswalk development or improvement.
- Traffic calming through installing solar radar feedback signs at the entrance to a downtown area, and through the use of speed bumps and rumble-strips.
- Development of a municipal plan for snow removal for pedestrian/bikeways. This could include sidewalk plowing, or an ordinance requiring property owners to maintain their own frontage.
- Installation or replacement of old street lighting with modern, downward-directed lighting. This can increase pedestrian visibility while reducing light pollution.
- Improvements to streetscape to allow for increased accessibility such as age-friendly infrastructure like benches and railings, and smooth, wheel-friendly surfaces with low or graded curbs.
- Constructing covered bike parking structures and downtown bike racks—great ways to encourage bicycle commuting.
- Launching a town-wide bike rental program, and/or a centrally located bike help center.
- Installing pet waste stations along paths and sidewalks, which helps ensure they stay clean and enjoyable for users.
- Improving signage. Partner with the municipality, highway department, and local artists to develop an integrated signage plan to improve visibility and direction. Signs could highlight features such as recreational infrastructure, bikeways, walking paths and rights-of-way, historic areas, downtown, and local businesses and attractions.
- Parking improvements such as properly designed parallel parking along downtown streets. These can be a good barrier between pedestrians and traffic, and can increase downtown parking capacity without having to create additional lots
- Aesthetic improvements. Partner with municipal officials and local volunteers to organize a tree trimming/planting campaign along downtown streets

- A campaign to bury power lines. In addition to eliminating poles, this can clear up skylines, and also reduce the number of power outages during storms
- Installing “No Engine Brake” signs on steep hills in town, and signs diverting large trucks to downtown bypasses
- Gathering creative ideas from community including artists, youth, seniors, and others, using a variety of tools, such as online platforms, planning charrettes, tabling at community events.

4. Share and celebrate with the community.

Host a public event to share a new transportation master plan and/or the successful completion of a bike/ped project with the community.

Develop and distribute maps of local trails, bike paths, and other recreational facilities to local hotels, restaurants, and other community gathering places. Post the same content to the municipal website.

Create a “Rules of the Road” pamphlet highlighting bike and pedestrian safety.

Organize a “bike to work” day, or other awareness-raising campaign for active transportation options.

Partner with local businesses to add incentives for commuters who walk or bike to work.

For additional outreach ideas, see “Communicating with the Community” p.7.

Resources

People Who Can Help

Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) are key partners in developing and implementing plans to improve bicycle and pedestrian safety and streetscape improvements. Find your RPC here: <https://www.vapda.org/>.

For planning assistance, contact the **VT Agency of Transportation Planning Coordinator**. Contact Dave Pelletier at dave.pelletier@vermont.gov, or 595-9675.

Local Motion could provide technical assistance around bike lanes, safety and trail development. Contact Jonathon Weber, Program Manager, at jonathon@localmotion.org, or 861-2700. Visit localmotion.org.

AARP has done great work supporting walkable communities and developing toolkits (see below) to point communities in the right direction to get started. Contact Kelly Stoddard Poor at kstoddardpoor@aarp.org, or 951-1313. Visit aarp.org/vermont.

The VT Agency of Transportation has a bicycle and pedestrian program to help provide safe and convenient facilities for Vermonters who desire alternative transportation opportunities. Contact Jon Kaplan at jon.kaplan@vermont.gov or 498-4742.

If a local effort is focused around the development of a biking or walking trail or path, the **Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC)** could be a potential partner to support development. Contact Breck Knauff, Executive Director at breck.knauff@vycc.org or 434-3969. Visit vycc.org.

Funding

The **VT Agency of Transportation (VTrans)** offers grant programs to support this work:

- Transportation Alternative Program — Contact Scott Robertson at scott.robertson@vermont.gov, or 828-5799. Visit vtrans.vermont.gov/highway/local-projects/transport-alt.
- Bicycle and Pedestrian Program — Contact Jon Kaplan at jon.kaplan@vermont.gov, or 828-0059. Visit vtrans.vermont.gov/highway/local-projects/bike-ped.
- The Better Connections Grant program provides funding to help communities develop plans that align land use, transportation, and community revitalization with transportation investments. Contact Jackie Cassino at Jackie.cassino@vermont.gov, or 272-2368. Visit vtrans.vermont.gov/planning/projects-programs/better-connections.

Towns can apply for Municipal Planning Grants from the **Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD)** to support planning projects.

- Contact Jenni Lavoie at jenni.lavoie@vermont.gov, or 828-1948. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/municipal-planning-grant.
- The Downtown Transportation Fund is a financing tool which assists municipalities in paying for transportation-related capital improvements within or serving a Designated Downtown. Contact Gary Holloway at gary.holloway@vermont.gov, or 522-2444. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/downtown-transportation-fund.

USDA Rural Development offers many grants for infrastructure, community facilities, and economic and community development. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) offers grants to support marketing, economic development, workforce development, infrastructure, etc. Visit nbrc.gov.

Vermont Housing Conservation Board (VHCB) has funding to help local groups hire grant writers to fund community and economic development projects. Contact Liz Gleason at liz@vhcb.org, or 828-3370. Visit vhcb.org/redi.

Guides and Other Resources

One resource to guide this work is “Quick Builds for Better Streets: A New Project Delivery Model for U.S. Cities” created by **People for Bikes**: peopleforbikes.org.

AARP pop up demonstration toolkit aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/livable-communities/images-2016/PopUpToolKit/PopUpToolKitPDF/a-Pop-Up-Demonstrations-Printable-272017.pdf.

Better Block betterblock.org.

America Walks has technical resources around pedestrian safety and crosswalks, etc. americawalks.org/learning-center/technical-resources/.

Expand Local Broadband Connectivity

Access to the internet is increasingly essential in modern life, for everything from communication and education to economic development, shopping, and health care. Filling the gaps in broadband connectivity will improve equity in our rural state, and many Vermont communities have identified broadband access as a top priority.

Action Steps

1. Build a team to assess and learn.

Invite community members who are interested in expanding local broadband to collaborate. Include local officials, businesspeople, educators, social service providers, and others who have knowledge of your community's needs. For tips, see "Inviting the Public" p.4.

Together, your team can inventory your community's needs and identify opportunities. Consider using these research processes:

- Create and distribute a public survey addressing current coverage, including a speed test for respondents to verify their current level of service, and questions about how much they'd be willing to pay for improved bandwidth.
- Review your town plan to determine whether expanding broadband connectivity is a highlighted priority, and whether any recommendations exist to address the issue.
- Invite representatives from the Department of Public Service to give a presentation to interested community members and local leaders about existing service in the region, and potential options for increasing connectivity. They can provide an overview of different technologies and resources, and help connect to other communities with successful models to copy.

Consult with local internet service providers (ISPs) and ascertain what steps they are taking to address the state's overall goal of 100/100 symmetrical service (100 megabytes per second for both upload and download speeds), and what support the community can provide in helping them achieve this goal.

2. Conduct a feasibility study.

Consult with Department of Public Service representatives about Broadband Innovation Grants or other funding to support a feasibility study.

If funding is awarded, consider hiring a consultant to help conduct a comprehensive study of expanding service throughout the community. The study would examine the physical, economic, and legal challenges of implementing an expanded broadband network.

Some components of this analysis can be undertaken by local volunteers instead of, or in advance of, hiring a consultant. For example:

- You can use results from the public survey (described in Step 1) as evidence of local demand for improved service.

- Engage local utility companies about the possibility of partnering with an internet service provider to utilizing existing utility infrastructure (phone or electric poles) as a platform for fiber expansion. If there is interest, ask them to provide an inventory of available infrastructure.
- Partner with local businesses and entrepreneurs to develop a case for increased connectivity from an economic development perspective. Consider uses for existing businesses, as well as the potential to attract new online services and remote workers. Highlight uses for the public service sector, from telehealth to online counseling to remote learning.
- Consider the intersection with public safety and resiliency. How might expanded broadband infrastructure integrate with a first responder network? How might connectivity feature in times of crisis?
- Are there any planned municipal infrastructure projects in the near future that could be combined with a fiber rollout to minimize cost (for instance, simultaneously burying fiber with a wastewater project)?

Consider joining a communications union district (CUD). CUDs offer smaller municipalities the opportunity to bargain collectively and apply for larger grant funding as a coalition. CUDs are often viewed as more attractive options for ISPs as they are able to offer a larger client base and may receive preference in certain grant programs. Joining a CUD requires a town-wide vote, but most CUD proposals in towns to date have been successful.

3. Communicate, educate, and gather support.

Throughout your effort, keep the public informed by posting regular updates to the town website, social media pages and any community listservs. For engagement ideas, see “Communicate with the Community” p.7.

Make sure communication is two-way—offer opportunities for discussion, and help people get their questions answered. Hearing ideas from community members will help inform your work; adjust your project as needed based on public input.

Host an event to discuss your proposal with the community. See “Managing Effective Meetings” p.18 for tips.

When you’re ready, seek endorsement from local officials, and from business and community leaders. Presenting a statement of purpose with a long list of signatures can send a powerful signal to ISPs or funders about a town’s unified commitment to a project.

4. Select a provider.

Submit your feasibility study to one or several ISPs and make the case for expanding service. Articulate any grant awards or other resources the town is prepared to contribute to the build-out of the network.

Resources

People Who Can Help

Vermont Department of Public Service (PSD) is the key contact at the State and can help the community explore available options. Contact, Rob Fish, Rural Broadband Technical Assistance Specialist at Robert.fish@vermont.gov, or 522-2617. Visit publicservice.vermont.gov.

NEK Broadband is a CUD in the Northeast Kingdom. Contact Evan Carlson, Chair, at evan@nekbroadband.org, or visit nekbroadband.org.

East Central (EC) Fiber is a CUD that has been serving parts of Washington, Orange and Windsor Counties for nearly a decade. Contact support@ecfiber.net, or visit www.ecfiber.net.

Your local **Regional Planning Commission (RPC)** can help convene state experts and regional stakeholders. Find your area RPC here: <https://www.vapda.org/>.

Funding

The Vermont Department of Public Service (PSD) offers Broadband Innovation Grants, that are designed to help local communities forward local broadband. The Vermont State Connectivity Initiative has grant funding for internet service providers that agree to extend service to designated areas least likely to be served through the private sector or through federal programs. Towns are encouraged to work with an internet service provider to identify projects that will meet private and public needs: For more information, contact Rob Fish, Rural Broadband Technical Assistance Specialist at Robert.fish@vermont.gov, or 522-2617. Visit publicservice.vermont.gov/connectivity.

The Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) has grant funds available for telecommunications and economic development projects. Contact Tim Tierney at tim.tierney@vermont.gov, or 505-5496. Visit nbrc.gov.

USDA Rural Development has grant/loan programs might provide useful (in particular the Rural Business Development Grant). Visit rd.usda.gov/vt, or contact Susan Poland, Business Programs Specialist at susan.poland@vt.usda.gov.

The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD)'s Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP) grants can help defray some of the cost associated with conducting a feasibility study and planning broadband roll-out. For more information, visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp or contact Cindy Blondin, Grants Specialist, at cindy.blondin@vermont.gov, or 828-5219.

Other Guides and Resources

The Vermont Department of Public Service has a helpful Frequently Asked Questions page on their site that covers useful information for local Broadband efforts. Visit publicservice.vermont.gov/content/expanding-broadband-frequently-asked-questions-faq.

Address Childcare Needs in Your Community

Access to high-quality, affordable childcare is one of the fundamental economic and workforce development issues facing Vermont. There is hardly a community in the state where families don't face significant barriers in this arena, and it is an issue that can affect the whole community. However, there are steps that communities can take to increase access to quality child care and support child care providers. Here are some steps that communities have found helpful to address this critical need.

Action Steps

1. Gather a team to research local child care needs and opportunities.

Assemble a diverse team of community members interested in the issue of childcare. Inviting a broad range of participation now will help inform your efforts. Parents and educators are likely to be interested, and invite representatives of businesses, service providers, and others. (See "Inviting the Public" p.4).

Conduct a community childcare asset and needs assessment. For many communities the biggest problem is a lack of sufficient childcare; however, a number of other childcare challenges may be present. Asking these and other questions can help you understand the needs and opportunities specific to your community:

- Is childcare available at the times families need it (e.g. for 2nd and 3rd shift workers)?
- Is it easy to find information on what childcare is available locally?
- Is existing childcare affordable for all?
- In addition to affordability, are there other barriers to finding childcare? For key considerations, see "Recognizing Diversity and Advancing Equity and Inclusion" p.27.
- Where is childcare working effectively, and what makes it work?

Gather feedback on these questions from a wide variety of stakeholders, including families, early childhood educators, employers, local school representatives, and other community members. Try different forms of outreach, including:

- Surveys (use both online and printed)
- Community convenings and focus groups
- One-on-one interviews with stakeholders
- For more tips on community outreach, see "Communicating with the Community" p.7.

For templates to follow in conducting your assessment and more information on Vermont's early care and education system see "Resources" below.

2. Analyze the data.

What did you learn from the assessment? Consider the following questions as you identify your community's assets, needs, and opportunities:

- What are the childcare needs in your community specific to families? To providers? To employers?
- Who (what demographic or sub-group) has the most need?
- What resources are available to help address these needs?
- Where is childcare working well, and what can you build on or learn from these models?
- Where (what part of the community, surrounding towns, region) are there needs? Where are childcare needs being fulfilled?
- Are local childcare needs driven primarily by residents, commuters to town, or both?
- How are the needs and assets you've observed likely to change over time? How will systems set up today be equipped to handle the demands of five or ten years from now?

3. Identify potential action steps.

Based on your analysis, what will be the most effective steps to close the gaps and lower barriers to accessing childcare in your community? In most cases there is no single solution, and it will likely take a combination of several different tactics to improve local childcare. To analyze your options, your group may wish to do a version of the process described in "Setting Priorities for Action."

At this stage, it can be helpful to reach out to regional and state partners for help, who can share a wealth of experience implementing childcare solutions. Some action steps that have proven successful in Vermont communities include:

- Providing information on family-friendly policies and programs to local businesses, including how to support employees' child care needs.
- Creating and distributing, and/or posting to the municipal website, information on childcare and early learning in Vermont. Materials could cover how to find local childcare options, Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program, and the region's community childcare support agency.
- Partnering with your municipality, state childcare advocates, resource providers, and/or local philanthropy to establish any of the following programs:
 - In-kind or capital support for existing regulated childcare providers to expand their capacity and strengthen the quality of their programming
 - A community childcare scholarship program to supplement the state's Child Care Financial Assistance Program
 - A community scholarship fund to help community members interested in pursuing an Associates or Bachelor's degree in early childhood education
- Updating municipal zoning ordinances to better accommodate the operation of childcare programs
- Working with community members and early childhood educators to create a new regulated childcare program (more information below in step 4).

For potential state partners and childcare models, see "Resources" below.

4. Develop and communicate your plan.

After you've identified priority solutions, map out an action plan. Depending on the scale of your project, this can be a short, bulleted list of action steps, or a longer comprehensive community childcare plan.

Communicate your plan with the community, especially those who offered ideas through your survey or other engagement efforts. Circling back with those who are most interested will help inform and strengthen your efforts.

If one of your action steps is to launch a new childcare program: Be sure your program meets all state and local regulations. Suggested steps include:

- Reviewing information provided by the Child Development Division of the Vermont Department of Children and Families on becoming a childcare provider.
- Determining what kind of program you want to open (registered Family Child Care Home, licensed Family Child Care Home, licensed Center-Based Child Care and Preschool Program, licensed After-School Program) and what type of operating structure you want to set up (non-profit, for profit, co-op). See the Small Business Administration's guide "How to Start A Quality Childcare Business" for a helpful overview (link under "Resources" below).
- Establishing a business plan and exploring a variety of funding options. (See "Budgeting and Fundraising" p.31 for starting tips.) Contact state and regional partners for current advice on childcare funding opportunities.
- Reviewing Vermont's Child Care Program Regulations for detailed information on licensing requirements. These are differentiated by the program type you choose – Family Child Care Homes, Center-Based Child Care and Preschool Program, or Afterschool Child Care Programs.

Resources

People Who Can Help

The **Child Development Division (CDD)** of the Vermont Department for Children and Families is the state agency responsible for overseeing the state's child care system. CDD can provide more information about how to start a child care program, licensing requirements, quality improvement, existing child care programs, etc. Contact child care licensing through their "Child Care Licensor of the Day" at ahs.dcfddchildcarelicensing@vermont.gov or 241-0837 dcf.vermont.gov/cdd.

Building Bright Futures is Vermont's public-private partnership for early childhood. The organization hosts regional councils of community members who work together to implement the state's Early Childhood Action Plan and address the needs of young children and their families. Regional Councils are a natural convening of key stakeholders that may be interested in supporting your work. Contact Morgan Crossman, Executive Director at mcrossman@buildingbrightfutures.org, or 881-1264. Visit buildingbrightfutures.org.

Let's Grow Kids, a non-profit working to ensure all Vermont families have affordable access to high-quality early care and education, has staff dedicated to supporting businesses and communities address their child care challenges. They may be able to provide information, resources, or technical assistance to help you identify solutions. Contact Sherry Carlson at sherry@letsgrowkids.org, or 989-1728. Visit letsgrowkids.org.

Your local **Regional Planning Commission (RPC)** may have experience addressing child care in the area and be able to offer support. They may also be able to provide guidance on actions the municipality can take to support the project. Find yours here: <https://www.vapda.org/>.

Regional development corporations (RDCs) may also be a good resource in connecting to economic development funds and integrating with regional business leaders: <https://accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/resources/rdc>.

Business plan support is available through the **Vermont Small Business Development Center**. Contact Linda Rossi at lrossi@vtsbdc.org. Visit vtsbdc.org.

The **Vermont Student Assistance Corporation** helps to administer a number of community and private scholarship opportunities for Vermont students. You can learn more about their scholarship programs at vsac.org/vsf/start-your-own-scholarship-fund.

Funding

Let's Grow Kids has several grant programs available to expand child care availability. Visit letsgrowkids.org/early-educator-resources to learn more.

The Vermont Community Foundation could help to fund a community-based child care program that expands availability. Contact Kevin Wiberg at kwiberg@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355. Visit vermontcf.org.

Your **local or regional bank** may have a number of loan programs geared towards projects that improve community welfare.

USDA Rural Development has funding that could support the development of community facilities such as a child care program. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

The Vermont Community Loan Fund can also be a partner in child care development – contact Will Belongia at will@vclf.org or 223-4428. Visit investinvermont.org.

Other Guides, Tools and Resources

Let's Grow Kids

- Who's Who and What's What in Vermont's Early Care & Learning System provides a lot of foundational information on Vermont's early care and education system: https://www.letsgrowkids.org/client_media/files/pdf/Whos%20Who%20Whats%20What.pdf.
- Stalled at the Start is an annual report on the supply of and demand for regulated child care in Vermont: <https://www.letsgrowkids.org/resources-publications#SAS>.

- Child Care Benefits that Work: https://letsgrowkids.org/client_media/files/pdf/Business%20Menu.pdf.
- Business and Childcare HR Pilot Program: https://letsgrowkids.org/client_media/files/pdf/BusinessChildCareHRPilot.pdf.

Vermont Afterschool — Visit <http://www.vermontafterschool.org/>. This interactive program map provides an overview of school-age child care and afterschool opportunities: <http://www.vermontafterschool.org/impact/map/>.

Early Learning Nation is a national resource offering guidance on creating a municipal landscape that is supporting to child care and early learning program. Their online Progress Rating Tool (<https://progressratingtool.earlylearningnation.com/>) allows users to self-assess the steps their community has taken to support child care, and offers a detailed list of supportive actions that can be taken on the community level to increase child care options and availability.

Vermont Department of Children and Families

- STARS Guide for Parents provides information on locating high-quality childcare in Vermont: https://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/CDD/Brochures/STARS_Brochure.pdf.
- Bright Futures Child Care Information System is an online directory of childcare providers across the state: <https://dcf.vermont.gov/childcare/providers/bfis>.
- Information on Vermont’s Child Care Financial Assistance Program: <https://dcf.vermont.gov/benefits/ccfap>.
- Information on Regional Child Care Support Agencies: <https://dcf.vermont.gov/cdd/cccsa>.
- Information on Becoming a Child Care Provider: <https://dcf.vermont.gov/childcare/providers/becoming-provider>.
- Childcare licensing regulations for:
 - Family Child Care Homes: http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/CDD/Docs/Licensing/FCCH_Final.pdf.
 - Center Based Child Care and Preschool Programs: http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/CDD/Docs/Licensing/CBCCPP_Regulations_FINAL.pdf.
 - Afterschool Child Care Programs: http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/CDD/Docs/Licensing/AS_Regulations_Final.pdf.

U.S. Small Business Administration – How to Start a Quality Child Care Business: https://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/files/pub_mp29.pdf.

Childcare Canada – Community Child Care Needs Assessment Toolkit includes sample survey questions, and recommendations on how to manage the needs assessment process: <https://www.childcarecanada.org/publications/other-publications/94/04/assessing-community-need-child-care-resource-material-conducti>.

City of Milpitas, California – Child Care Master Plan gives a good example of a comprehensive community child care plan: http://www.ci.milpitas.ca.gov/pdfs/child_care_master_plan.pdf.

Model Vermont Projects

Craftsbury Saplings began as a community-driven initiative to expand access to child care. The program uses space donated by the East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church, the meal program receives donations from Pete's Greens and other local farms, volunteers from the Craftsbury Community Care Center and Sterling College regularly help out, and the program is able to offer scholarships thanks to funding from the town. You can learn more about the program through their website (craftsburysaplings.com), the original press release (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qfcODSSyzZRM BacSL9pf9DPsT6JR2bFzVQHCBp19o0I>) announcing their opening, or from the Craftsbury Town Annual Report: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55313cc9e4b0ff30bb953cde/t/5a9bcd90e4966b23a720db85/1520160236923/Town_report_2017_compressed.pdf.

Burlington has implemented a couple of financial support programs to help expand childcare capacity:

- Early Learning Initiative Capacity Grant Program: <https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/sites/default/files/ELI%20Grant%20Application%20Summer%202019.pdf>.
- First Steps Scholarship Program: <https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/sites/default/files/First%20Steps%20FAQ%202020.pdf>.

Grow the Local Climate Economy

As the consensus grows about the long-term ecological and economic impacts of climate change, communities around the world are pioneering cost-effective ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and sustain a vibrant economy. Those communities that develop innovative models to transform energy use and cut carbon emissions are will thrive—drawing visitors, new residents, and new businesses. The challenges we face are large enough that we must act at all levels, from the hyper-local to the global.

Action Steps

1. Recruit a team and choose a structure.

Energy use spans across many categories and users, so working with a diverse group will enhance your effectiveness. You can take a couple of different approaches to recruit a team:

Project-based organizing: It can be easier to recruit others when you’re working on a specific project. Window Dressers or the Efficiency Vermont’s Button-Up Campaign (see project list below) are examples of local projects that require a small team to organize. Solar for municipal or school buildings is another tangible project with a strong track record of success. Under this model, you organize around the selected project, finding those who are willing to join in implementation. The group can then evolve into a more permanent energy committee to take on other projects.

Forming an energy or climate action committee: Another approach is to build a group of volunteers and together identify priorities that match the interests of the team. Nearly 100 towns in Vermont have an energy committee or coordinator. In some places, it may make sense to form a multi-town committee. For excellent tools to start a local energy committee, see the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network under “Resources” (below). As you form a committee, here are some key considerations:

Some energy committees are formal sub-committees that are part of municipal government. Others are simply an ad-hoc group of individuals. Each approach is worthy of careful consideration as you get started:

| | Municipal Committee | Ad-hoc or Independent Committee |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Possible advantages | Formal connection with the town can enable the group to get more done. It also can mean receiving staff support and financial support from the municipality. | The group is free to set priorities and membership without any limitations or formal town involvement. The work of the group does not fall under laws governing municipalities. |
| Possible disadvantages | Must follow laws that apply to municipal committees, including open-meeting laws, freedom-of-information, etc. Often members must be appointed by the select board. | Without a formal connection to the municipality, any efforts requiring municipal involvement or approval may face a greater challenge. |

Regardless of the structure of your committee, you'll want a core group of people committed to achieving your energy goals. As you recruit, consider:

Who are the community members who are already active, addressing energy issues on social media or community listservs?

- Is there anyone with professional expertise in an energy-related field?
- Invite as diverse a group as possible, thinking beyond obvious allies. For instance, are there business owners, landlords, or others who share a concern about climate and energy but may see the topic from a different angle? Building a team from across the community will amplify the committee's credibility and can help future cross-sector partnerships. (See "Inviting the Public" p.4).
- Having a direct and open channel of communication with municipal leadership and other institutional partners (school, hospital, large non-profits) can also be valuable in helping to accelerate projects.
- The size of the committee will depend on the size of your community, but in general, 5-7 people is large enough to ensure good participation, but not too large to manage.

Connecting with other Energy Committees in nearby towns can be a great way of gathering ideas and advice, and will help build your local network. In some instances, multi-town committees can reach critical mass and to incite collaboration. The Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN) is helpful in connecting to other local energy champions (see Resources below). Your local Regional Planning Commission can also be helpful in making connections and providing support.

Recruitment is never over. New members provide new energy and perspective. At events and through other means, continually communicate about your work, celebrate successes, and invite greater participation in your committee. This helps maintain community interest and even create opportunities for leadership succession as some members move on from the committee. See "Communicating with the Community" p.7.

2. Research the issues.

As you consider how you will be most effective, you and your team can review energy issues both statewide and in your community.

A good starting point is the Vermont Energy Dashboard maintained by the Energy Action Network (EAN) which includes a variety of data on energy use in all Vermont towns. Find it here: <https://www.vtenergydashboard.org/my-community>. EAN also publishes a helpful annual report providing an update on Vermont's progress towards achieving 90% renewable energy across all sectors by 2050: <https://www.eanvt.org/2019-progress-report/>.

It is also helpful to understand energy expenses for a typical Vermont household. Efficiency Vermont's Energy Burden Report shows that about 50% of a typical Vermont household's energy spending is for transportation, with the remainder split between electricity and home heating/cooling: <https://www.encyvermont.com/news-blog/whitepapers/vermont-energy-burden>.

Review your official town plan. Many towns have an energy section in their town plan, and some towns have developed enhanced energy plans that include specific goals tied to Vermont’s Comprehensive Energy Plan.

3. Set priorities for action.

As you bring your committee together (or renew your efforts), strategic planning will help you guide your work and build team cohesion. An action plan identifies the committee’s interests and helps assess how you can have the greatest impact. For process suggestions, see “Setting Priorities for Action p.13. Here are a variety of priorities considered by energy committees across Vermont:

An energy committee can promote and encourage, but for the most part, they are not the “decider” when it comes to various energy-related investments and behavior changes. Energy use and greenhouse gas emissions are the result of countless decision made by individuals, businesses, and institutions. At their most successful, energy committees serve as an indispensable resource, helping area residents, businesses, towns and institutions to make informed choices that reduce costs and emissions. Energy committees can also serve as a connector/facilitator, bringing statewide and regional resources into the community through events and programs. It is worthwhile to consider the most effective roles the committee can play as you develop priorities.

This chart can be a helpful tool in thinking through your areas of focus:

| | Individuals | Businesses | The municipality, schools, and other institutions |
|------------------------------|-------------|------------|---|
| Building Electricity | | | |
| Building Heating and Cooling | | | |
| Transportation | | | |

Data can help inform your decision-making about priorities. Refer to the data sources listed above as you consider where to focus your work. At the same time, be careful not to focus so much on metrics and very specific emissions or kWh calculations that it inhibits the work of moving projects forward. Let data inform your efforts and provide a measure of success without hamstringing your work.

As you get started, you may want to identify some “quick wins” to create momentum and build cohesion with your team. Rarely does an energy committee or a municipality have the expertise or financial resources to take on an energy project alone. Successful energy committees join with available partners and programs to achieve tangible results. Here are a few examples:

- The Button-Up Program, designed specifically for energy committee implementation
- Working with Efficiency Vermont to do an energy assessment of municipal buildings
- Hosting a workshop on electric vehicles, heat pumps, modern wood heating, or some other energy technology.

Once you have a group of people who are interested, establish your internal structure. Will you have a chair, treasurer and secretary? Will you establish sub-groups to work on different topic areas? How will you communicate with the public about your work? Some committees find it helpful to develop a mission statement or other foundational document to set their direction. Others prefer a more informal structure.

Ideas for Energy Projects and Initiatives

Communities across Vermont have taken creative steps to reduce energy use and strengthen their local energy economy. Here are some examples to inspire your efforts:

The Button-Up program can be a great first step for an energy committee. It started as a fall counterpart to Green-Up Day, encouraging Vermonters to take steps to reduce energy usage as the weather begins to cool. Efficiency Vermont hosts Button-Up statewide. The program gives town energy committees tools to engage community members in thermal efficiency projects.

Window Dressers is a non-profit organization that hosts town-based efforts to construct seasonal window inserts for local residents using volunteers. While running a Window Dressers program is intense, it also follows a consistent format from town-to-town, and can be a good way to engage new community members.

Forming strong connections with the municipal staff or volunteers responsible for town facilities will help your energy committee's success. Often municipalities have a long list of infrastructure projects, and energy-related improvements don't always rise to the top of the list. As you consider where your town's most effective investments might be, you can start by conducting a town-wide inventory of current energy systems. This can be as simple as an overview of public heating systems, or as in-depth as a detailed energy audit for all municipal buildings. Work with your municipality and state efficiency programs to highlight opportunities for increased efficiency and identify retrofits, retro-commissioning and weatherization projects that could ultimately save the town (and taxpayers) money. Keep in mind that buildings of historical significance may qualify for additional funding.

Develop a community solar project. Many schools and municipalities are participating in local solar projects to help generate more renewable energy and bring down energy costs. These reduced costs ultimately get passed along to taxpayers. To get started, engage with your local school or town to figure out their electricity costs and whether they are already participating in a solar project. Share with them the different ways that schools and towns have gone solar. You might consider also engaging one or more solar developers. Some specialize in working with schools and municipalities and can answer questions and resolve concerns. Sometimes a local energy committee serving as the liaison to a solar developer and helping navigate the regulatory landscape is all that is needed to get a local solar project off the ground.

Host public events to raise awareness of energy-related technologies and the variety of programs and rebates available. Your committee can produce and distribute educational

materials highlighting new energy-saving opportunities, and can host forums, fairs or other events with guest speakers. Some committees also host energy-efficient home tours. Efficiency Vermont offers a number of workshops. Your regional planning commission may be able to help staff and promote these events.

Promote electric vehicles (EVs). EVs represent an enormous opportunity to cut carbon emissions and reduce transportation costs over time. Energy committees can promote EVs in many ways such as helping to install public charging stations or hosting events that bring EV owners together with those curious to learn more.

Organize a Solarize or Weatherize Campaign. Vital Communities has been organizing Solarize and Weatherize campaigns in towns in the Upper Valley for over five years (see Resources below). These community-level campaigns promote investments in residential solar and weatherization. Local organizations engage residents to promote these energy choices, and engage contractors to deliver consistent and high-quality service.

Partner with statewide efficiency programs to offer special promotions to your community. Efficiency Vermont offers an array of programs to support Vermonters, and they understand the value of working with an energy committee to get things done (see Resources below).

Be a champion of public transit and alternative transportation. For instance:

- Work with your local public transit provider to identify opportunities for residents and organize a ride-the-bus-campaign
- If your area is not served by public transit, you can develop a community carpool program
- Offer free bike tune-up days and work to improve walking and bike infrastructure in your downtowns
- See “Improve Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility” p.48 for more ideas.

Reducing waste is an important element of sustainability. Look at ways of auditing your community waste stream. Connect with local composters and coordinate a town composting program. Offer free hazardous waste disposal days, sponsored by local businesses or community organizations.

Develop an energy resiliency campaign that highlights the value of community micro-storage of power. Having small-scale, distributed battery back-up can not only be helpful during a power outage, but in some cases can help electrical utilities flatten peak demand curves and reduce both their generation needs and cost for ratepayers. Many electric companies have rebates for wall-mounted battery backup systems for individuals and businesses.

Some **rebates** exist even for things like electric lawnmowers and electric bicycles! Check in frequently with your local utility and with state efficiency programs for the latest programs.

Contribute to your town's Energy Plan. Each municipality is statutorily required to include an element in the Town Plan addressing energy consumption, and under Act 174, towns also have the option of developing enhanced energy plans. Offering your assistance and expertise as a committee can transform this chapter from a legal requirement to a dynamic guiding document.

Resources

People Who Can Help

The **Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN)** is a great resource for technical assistance and connection to other energy committees around the state. Contact Johanna Miller at the Vermont Natural Resources Council to learn the best way to access their resources at jmiller@vnrc.org, or 223-2328. Visit vecan.net.

Efficiency Vermont is the largest state-wide efficiency provider. They have dozens of programs, incentives and rebates designed to help communities lower their energy consumption. Learn more about their community work here: efficiencyvermont.com/services/education-events/community-economic-partnerships. Contact Michelle McCutcheon-Schour at mmschour@veic.org.

Your **local electric utility company** may have programs or staff that can be of service. All Vermont utilities are providing programs and incentives to help their customer shift away from fossil fuels. Find service providers in your region using the interactive utility map here: publicservice.vermont.gov/electric/electric_service_territory_map

Here are a few key contacts:

Vermont Electric Coop – Lisa Morris, VEC Energy Service Planner, lmorris@vermontelectric.coop.

Washington Electric Coop – Bill Powell, bill.powell@wec.coop.

Green Mountain Power – Emily Eckert, Emily.Eckert@greenmountainpower.com.

Most of Vermont's Municipal Utilities – (See here for a list - vppsa.com/members) - Julia Leopold, Vermont Public Power Supply Association, jleopold@vppsa.com.

The **Vermont Department of Forest Parks and Recreation** have staff dedicated to supporting communities explore advanced, modern wood heat systems. For more information, contact Wood Energy Coordinator Emma Hanson at emma.hanson@vermont.gov.

Your local **Regional Planning Commission** can be of great help in accessing town and regional energy plans, and in staffing energy related events. Find yours here: <https://www.vapda.org/>.

Your **local public transit provider** may be interested in helping with initiatives that promote ridership. To find the provider nearest you visit connectingcommuters.org/bus-info/bus-providers.

The **Energy Action Network (EAN)** is a great resource for connecting to other partners. They offer a powerful online Vermont Energy Dashboard, which compiles data about energy usage, renewable generation, composting, wind power, wood heat, electric vehicles and much more. Contact Carolyn Wesley, Network Manager at cwesley@eanvt.org, or 734-0046. Visit vtenergydashboard.org.

The **Department of Public Service** can be a great resource in exploring state programs and determining feasibility. Contact Anne Margolis at anne.margolis@vermont.gov, or 828-4007.

Funding

The **New England Grass Roots Environmental Fund** has jumpstarting grants for small projects. Visit grassrootsfund.org.

The **Vermont Community Foundation** may be able to identify funding sources for local projects. Contact Kevin Wiberg at kwiberg@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355. Visit vermontcf.org.

High Meadows Fund may have funding available for projects that address energy and efficiency, land use, or farm, food and forest enterprises. Visit highmeadowsfund.org.

USDA Rural Development Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) grants could fund smaller scale renewable projects. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development may have grants to support for a utility scale energy project. Contact Cindy Blondin at cindy.blondin@vermont.gov, or 828-5219. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp.

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. You can search the **Vermont Foundations Directory** using keywords like “environmental conservation” “energy” “sustainability” or other words that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area. Find the database here: fdovermont.foundationcenter.org.

Guides and Other Resources:

For anyone looking to start a local Town Energy Committee, the **Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN)** hosted by the Vermont Natural Resources Council is a great resource. This is an assembly of local town energy committees and other interested organizations. They have a great guide to starting an energy committee that you can find here: vecan.net/energy-committes/getting-started.

Examples of Successful Community Projects

The **Northfield Energy Committee** has led an annual effort to boost alternative and public transportation in their community as well as other initiatives in their town. Learn more about their work here: northfield-vt.gov/text/NEC.html.

The **Huntington Vermont Energy Committee** led an effort to install a solar array on the Town Garage. Contact the committee here: huntingtonvt.org/energy-committee.

Middlebury, Pownal, and Randolph were the first three communities to participate in the Climate Economy Model Communities Program hosted by VCRD. In this brief summary you can find case studies of their work to promote local farms, deploy a neighborhood energy project, and invest in local electric vehicle charging stations: vtrural.org/sites/default/files/Overview%20and%20ProfilesFinal.pdf.

The **VECAN website** is chock full of examples of great local projects. They are organized by topic and can be viewed here: vecan.net/resources.

EAN's VT Energy Dashboard is not only a source of data, but also stories of community-scale projects. The full list can be found here: vtenergydashboard.org/stories

Expand and Improve Community Communications

In a world teeming with global information sources competing for our attention, many communities feel the need to step up their local communication tools to build community connection and unity. Here are some of the actions Vermont towns have taken to increase and improve their local communication channels, and along the way, strengthen community.

Action Steps

1. Gather a Team to Inventory the Communications Landscape

Organize a group of people interested in improving communication in your town. Be as inclusive as possible in creating this group; this will help make sure your work is well informed and effective. Together, you can take some or all of these steps:

- Make a list of the groups, organizations, or committees operating in town. Now consider: What channels of communication currently exist between them?
 - How do residents access information about groups and activities in town?
 - How do residents communicate with larger groups, and with one another?
 - Which people (and networks) in town are focal points of information?
- Develop a list of the major gaps in communication. What obstacles create these gaps? Consider:
 - Geography / topography
 - Connectivity (internet and other means)
 - Political and social divisions
 - Language barriers
 - Economic divisions
 - Accessibility (physical, cognitive)
 - Educational disparities
 - For further exploration, see “Recognizing Diversity and Advancing Equity and Inclusion” p.27.
- Develop and distribute a community survey to gather ideas on residents’ preferred methods of communication and what they think might be missing today.

2. Expand existing tools and explore new ones.

As your team examines communications options, consider the following media:

- The town website
 - Is the town’s website user-friendly? Is it easy to find what you need? Does it share events and news beyond just town business? Is there willingness and capacity to broaden what is shared on that site?

- Does the town's website integrate well with major search engines (Google, Bing, Wikipedia)? Does the town website support push technology (RSS feeds)?
- For a short tutorial on improving website visibility, click [here](#). Consider work with a consultant to improve website accessibility and visibility, and/or try reaching out to see if someone in your town might volunteer website skills
- Front Porch Forum or other community listserv platforms. Consider a campaign to increase the use of these local communications platforms
- An online and/or printed community calendar distributed among residents and local businesses/organizations
- A centrally located, regularly curated bulletin board with community updates
- A monthly or quarterly newsletter mailed and/or emailed directly to residents
- Municipal social media presence:
 - Is someone posting regular updates and events to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram?
 - What hashtags exist to track community happenings? Could new ones be created?
 - Partnering with local radio and tv stations to promote events
 - For additional ideas, see "Communicating with the Community" p.7

3. Improve communications tools, access, and use.

Consider establishing a single online communications hub to serve as a clearinghouse for all town events and public information. This hub can contain links to all the major online resources in town. Encourage local groups and organizations to post content to this hub, and to link from their own sites. If this is successful, it will make it simple for residents to find information and make it easier for organizers to get the word out.

Develop a system for engaging individuals and families lacking internet.

- Inventory physical locations with high foot-traffic for potential public bulletin boards or sandwich boards
- Ask the municipality, local utilities companies, and other organizations about collaborating on direct mailings to residents (e.g. inserting informational flier with bills)
- Engage local media including print, radio, and television
- Discuss communication strategies with local organizations such as the library, senior center, and Meals on Wheels

Bring together local groups with frequent public and intergroup communications and strategize a system of coordination and mutual support.

- Event cross-promotion can multiply your message and introduce organizations to new audiences
- Agreeing to a common schedule or posting protocol can reduce competition and maximize community contact
- Facebook and other social media can be useful tools for inter-group discussion, gathering commentary, and scheduling events

Consider establishing a paid or volunteer public administrator position to coordinate town communications. Duties could include:

- Maintaining the municipal information hub
- Fielding public questions or suggestions
- Tracking the community calendar and sending reminders to organizations to post on Front Porch Forum and other listservs
- Staffing a table at public events to raise awareness of the town’s information hub and signing people up for local listservs
- Creating and distributing public flyers and other printed materials.

4. Tell the story.

Convene a diverse cross-section of community members to develop a shared vision for a municipal narrative: a public outreach campaign that highlights what makes your community a great place to live.

Utilize all the new and reinvigorated communication channels and partnerships above to share this story with the broader community.

Resources

People Who Can Help

Front Porch Forum can help support a local campaign to increase participation in the local forum. Contact Lynne Espey at lpespey@frontporchforum.com. Visit frontporchforum.com.

Talk to other Vermont communities and local newspapers about ways they have worked together to share positive local news. Check out this **Seven Days** article on three particularly successful local papers: sevendaysvt.com/vermont/how-three-vermont-media-companies-keep-the-pressesrolling/Content?oid=2627304

The Vermont Arts Council may be able to post local arts events on the statewide Arts Calendar. Contact Karen Mittleman, Executive Director, at kmittelman@vermontartscouncil.org, or 828-5420. Visit vermontartscouncil.org.

Contact the **Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD)** for advice and support and to connect to other communities focusing on communications and connection. Contact Jenna Koloski at jenna@vtrural.org or at 225-6091. Visit vtrural.org.

Funding

The Vermont Community Foundation could have grant programs available that would contribute to events or event series – especially if they engage youth and bring the community together. Contact Kevin Wiberg at kwiberg@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x284. Visit vermontcf.org.

The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) may provide grants and technical support as well as tax credits in Designated Downtown and Village Centers.

- For the **Designated Downtown Program** contact Gary Holloway at gary.holloway@vermont.gov, or 522-2444. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/designation-programs/downtowns.
- For the **Designated Village Center Program** contact Richard Amore at richard.amore@vermont.gov or 585-0061. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/designation-programs/village-centers
- For the **Community Development Block Grant Program** contact Cindy Blondin at cindy.blondin@vermont.gov or 828-5219. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp.

USDA Rural Development Business Enterprise Grants or Rural Business Opportunity Grants could be accessed for branding that helps local businesses. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

Guides and Other Resources

There are some great examples across Vermont of community calendars, websites, and social media that are helping with communications (and places where you might share your events as well):

- **Rutland Recreation:** rutlandrec.com/events
- **Rutland Chamber of Commerce** (they post events for the whole region): rutlandvermont.com/rutland-killington-regional-calendar-of-events
- **Island Pond Chamber of Commerce:** visitislandpond.com/events-and-festivals
- **Vermont Calendar of Events:** vermontvacation.com/stay-and-play/events
- **Craftsbury Community Events:** townofcraftsbury.com/craftsbury-ss-calendar

Develop a Community Center

Some communities want to provide a gathering place for seniors; others want to serve youth and families. Still others are seeking a multi-use gathering place to learn, create art, maintain health and fitness, support small businesses, or pursue other common interests. Across Vermont, different communities have taken the following steps (not always in this order) to help realize their vision for a community center.

Action Steps

1. Collaborate on a common vision.

Reach out to individuals and existing community groups who might be interested in developing a community center. Build a project leadership team that can solicit ideas on existing community programs, current needs, and the potential of a new community center. Together, your team might:

- Meet with local leaders and social service providers
- Host a series of community conversations or public forums to engage as many sectors of the community as possible
- Distribute a public survey (print and online) to solicit input

Synthesize this public input into a “wish list” for the community center. These items may not all be possible, but they can be used to guide feasibility analysis.

For more ideas, see “Developing a Community Vision” p.10.

2. Determine the structure and function of the community center.

Using the public input as a guide, determine the key functions that a community center would play in the community. Is it a recreation center, a senior center, a youth center, a place for events, activities, meals, or services?

Identify community partnerships that could be leveraged to increase usage and public benefit of the space. Is there a local recreation program that could collaborate? Are there local senior programs, exercise classes, or a business incubator program that could use the space?

Determine a structure to fund and manage a community center. In some towns, community centers are owned and managed by the municipality. In others, the centers are managed by an independent non-profit or business. What’s right for your community?

For techniques to help identify key interests, see “Setting Priorities for Action” p.13.

3. Renovate or Build?

Based on the community’s desires the available building stock, decide whether to renovate an existing structure or begin new construction. Some communities hire a community development consultant to help gather ideas from the public, conduct a feasibility study, and navigate other logistics of development.

For a renovation:

- Inventory existing under-utilized facilities in town. Determine if there are spaces available to meet the community's needs and the desired function of the center.
- Once a site is selected, get a skilled appraisal of upgrades necessary to meet code. Consider structural integrity, plumbing, electrical, insulation, heating, lead exposure, and accessibility.

For a new construction:

- Consider consulting an experienced developer or architect, both in designing the structure and budgeting the construction process.
- Draft clear and detailed drawings that will help the community get a sense of what is proposed and provide their ideas and suggestions.

4. Organize to advance your project.

Establish a project committee and a regular meeting schedule. Subcommittees or working groups might include:

- **Communication and Engagement:** Responsible for getting the word out and engaging the public on this effort. Communication should be open, two-way, and continue throughout every step of the process. (See "Communicating with the Community" p.7).
- **Fund Development:** Responsible for creating a budget, doing capital planning, and finding funding. This group might do community fundraising, and apply for state, federal, or foundation grants. They might also hire a fundraising consultant. (See "Budgeting and Fundraising" p.31).
- **Programming:** Responsible for planning what will happen at the community center. Ideas include an opening celebration and an initial calendar of events.

5. Develop a business and operating plan.

Meet with other public and private community, youth, and senior centers around the state to learn more about their governance structures and models for sustainability.

Plan how the community center will sustain itself over the long term. Will the center charge a fee for services (e.g. space rental)? A membership program? What fundraising will occur on an ongoing basis?

Determine what resources the municipality contribute (e.g. snow removal?). Will the community center receive an annual contribution from the municipal budget?

Decide how grant funds and donations will be allocated to specific programs.

Create a governance and management structure for the new center. Will there be a Board of Directors? An executive manager? Will the center have employees?

Develop a clear and concise marketing plan to pitch to investors.

6. Implement, communicate, and celebrate.

Once funding is secured and plans are in place, work with contractors and consultants to complete renovation or construction.

Build programming when ready.

Develop printed materials to post around town with information about the center and programs available.

Develop a comprehensive, easy-to-update and user-friendly website with a list of programs and schedule of events.

Host an opening day celebration for the community. Invite everyone!

Foster ongoing local interest in the center to infuse the space with community energy. For instance:

- Engage community volunteer groups and assess their capacity to provide ongoing support towards the maintenance and operation of the building.
- Hold community workdays to celebrate the center and engage in cleaning, painting, planting, or other improvements to the building and grounds.
- Consider encouraging the use of the community center for potlucks, birthday parties, and other social gatherings.

Resources

People Who Can Help

The **Vermont Small Business Development Center** could help with Business Plan development. Contact Linda Rossi at LRossi@vtsbdc.org, or 728-9101. Visit vtsbdc.org.

If the project would involve the renovation and preservation of an historic building, the **Preservation Trust of Vermont** could be a key partner for consultation, project development assistance, fiscal counseling and potential grant support if a building is over fifty years old. Contact Lisa Ryan at lisa@ptvermont.org or 917-2994. Visit ptvermont.org.

The **Vermont Division for Historic Preservation** could also provide information about how to rehabilitate and use historic buildings, and provide information about any financial resources available for that purpose. Contact Laura Trieschmann at laura.trieschmann@vermont.gov or 828-3222. Visit accd.vermont.gov/historic-preservation.

If the Center you are developing focuses on youth, **Vermont Afterschool** has developed a detailed guide to support communities that are developing a youth/teen center and they can also provide technical assistance and help you connect to other youth centers in the state. Find their guide and other resources at vermontafterschool.org or contact Holly Morehouse at info@vermontafterschool.org or 448-3464.

Funding

The **Vermont Community Foundation** may have funding to support a community center project. Contact Kevin Wiberg at kwiberg@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x284. Visit vermontcf.org.

Vermont Department of Buildings and General Services has a Building Communities grant program that can fund community facilities projects. Contact Judy Bruneau at judy.bruneau@vermont.gov, or 828-3519. Visit bgs.vermont.gov/commissioner/building-communities-grants.

The **Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development** has several grant programs that could support both feasibility and planning efforts as well as building and implementation. To learn more contact Cindy Blondin at cindy.blondin@vermont.gov, or 828-5219. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development.

USDA Rural Development provides grants to support community facilities. Contact Misty Sinsigalli at misty.sinsigalli@usda.gov, or 828-6069. Visit www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs/community-facilities-programs.

Christine Graham is a very skilled and experienced fund development and capital campaign advisor/consultant. Contact Christine Graham through **CPG enterprises** through cpgfundraising.com.

Vermont Housing Conservation Board has funding to help local groups hire grant writers to fund community and economic development projects. Contact Liz Gleason at liz@vhcb.org, or 828-3370. Visit vhcb.org/redi.

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. You can search the **Vermont Foundations Directory** using keywords like “community” “youth” or other words that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area. Visit fdovermont.foundationcenter.org.

Community Center Projects or Peer Learning

Huntington Town Hall: Visit townhall.huntingtonvt.org

The Bristol Hub Teen Center and Skate Park: Visit bristolskatepark.com

Broad Brook Community Center at the Guilford Grange: Visit broadbrookcommunitycenter.org

Brookfield Old Town Hall: facebook.com/brookfieldoldtownhall

Cambridge Community Center: thecambridgecc.com/info/default.aspx

Develop a Co-working Space

Vermont's village centers and downtowns are seeing a growing interest in co-working spaces. Successful in urban areas, these flexible businesses offer self-employed individuals and those working remotely a professional work environment, and often double as central hubs for workshops, networking, and other professional development. The last decade has seen an increase in the number of these spaces from a small handful in the Burlington area to over 30 across the state.

Action Steps

1. Understand co-working basics.

Visit existing co-working spaces. Sit down with someone who has already started the process to ask for advice and support. (See "Resources" below.)

Consider the finances. As with launching any new business, starting a coworking space is not easy. It can require a sizeable initial investment. Very few of the current 30 space proprietors are able to pay themselves a living wage, and many currently rely on sizeable state subsidies to stay in operation. Proprietors report that running a coworking space is a labor of love.

Consider technology. Initial investments may include significant technological retrofitting of the physical space. Even the day-to-day operation of the premises requires a fairly sophisticated technical background, as you will likely have to operate and troubleshoot the interaction between different software (think automated key access, remote logins, etc.)

Consider the competition. Take note of the cafés, libraries, and other public spaces that currently offer free WiFi. Be sure that the suite of services you're offering includes more than just internet access. In your geographic location, how will you make it worthwhile for enough people travel to the co-working space?

Although challenging, taking a realistic look at these considerations at the outset will help maximize the long-term viability of your project. The upside of these challenges in rural Vermont is that those individuals who remain committed are seriously invested in the idea and constitute a supportive network.

2. Take stock of the existing work environment.

Consider which of the following research efforts will help you discover how your co-working space can be most successful.

Identify co-working spaces in the region, as well as other local organizations that might be serving a similar function. Is there another space within 30 miles? Is there a local café or public venue currently offering WiFi and an opportunity for remote work? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, you might be better off collaborating with existing facilities than launching a new one.

Create and distribute a needs and interests survey to community members and local businesses, with particular emphasis on home-based business and self-employed service providers. What challenges do they currently face regarding:

- Infrastructure—physical space, location, internet connectivity
- Finance—securing loans, connecting with local funders
- Visibility—advertising, brand recognition, customer awareness

Identify successful local businesses and ask whether they would be willing to be interviewed regarding their views on the need for co-working space, as well as for advice they might offer a business start-up.

Host an entrepreneurship meet-and-greet, inviting local business owners, municipal leadership, and potential investors. Ask attendees about their interest in the idea of a co-working space. Be sure to collect contact information.

3. Consult with potential clients.

Based on survey response data, takeaways from your meet-and-greet, or other research, make a list of specific businesses or individuals that constitute a potential client base.

Through a series of conversations, or by convening likely clients in one meeting, learn as much as you can about potential users of the coworking space, and refine your understanding of their needs.

- What professions are represented in the group?
- What are their needs pertaining to physical space, privacy, connectivity, and financial support?
- How much would they be willing to pay for various services?
- What geographic location would work best?

4. Explore business models.

Based on your research regarding the most pressing needs of your community and your potential clients, refine the focus of your co-working space. Possibilities include:

- an IT hub and co-working office space, with places to work alone and to host meetings
- a manufacturing or artist-based maker-space
- an entrepreneurial incubator or business accelerator
- a community kitchen

Inventory suitable local underutilized spaces, noting infrastructure assets and deficits. Conduct a feasibility analysis to determine the best location.

Meet with local and state philanthropic organizations and grant-writing agencies to explore potential start-up funding.

Contact similar enterprises in other parts of the state to gather advice.

Build a business plan with an emphasis on ongoing financial sustainability. Describe the ownership / membership model, and any additional revenue sources. What services will be provided?

5. Implement your business plan.

Apply for grant/loan funding to implement your business plan.

Outfit your location to serve your clients. Be sure to consider utilities, furniture and fixtures, any amenities you want to offer (kitchen or kitchenette, fully stocked bathrooms, conference and meetings rooms, etc.)

Before opening, be sure that your business is incorporated with the State of Vermont in order to register your company name, get a tax identification number, and a legal standing to open bank accounts. You will need to decide the structure that best matches your needs (non-profit, LLC, coop, etc.). Vermont's Corporations Division of the Office of the Secretary of State can help guide new companies. It may also be useful to get professional accounting and legal advice to make these decisions and build and implement your business plan.

6. Build membership.

Develop a brand and an "elevator pitch" so you can succinctly describe the value of your new business. Include a short value proposition or motivation for starting the incubator or coworking space.

Consider hosting small business pitch sessions to attract entrepreneurs and investors, and to increase visibility.

Host pop-up events around the community to spread awareness.

Contact your local chamber of commerce about advertising in their newsletter.

Promote the co-working space using a variety of media (see "Communicating with the Community" p.7).

7. Share and connect with the community.

Even with a successful membership/client base, you will probably need to supplement that income by offering broader community events, or by providing space rentals. The more far-reaching your presence and brand-recognition in the community, the better footing you will have for promoting these services.

- Host an opening celebration and invite the community.
- Offer events for community members including lectures, workshops, community pop-up shops, celebrations, concerts, trivia nights, happy hours, etc. to keep the community interested and engaged.
- Offer services that could be useful to municipal/community groups such as video equipment rental, recording booth rental, high speed internet access, or community meeting space.
- Consider connecting to VermontPass, a coalition of co-working spaces across the state that allows members access to any member spaces.

Resources

People Who Can Help

The National Business Incubator Association (NBIA) is an excellent resource on the current state and success of incubators. There are many ways to structure an incubator, private, public, non-profit, for profit, university partner or not, NBIA is a great resource to start reading and learning. Visit nbia.org.

Contact owners of other co-working spaces in Vermont to learn more about their models:

- **The Space on Main, Bradford:** Contact Monique Priestley, Executive Director and Founder, at thespaceonmain@gmail.com, or 222-1909. Visit thespaceonmain.org.
- **Due North Coworking, Lyndonville:** Contact Evan Carlson, Executive Director at evan.carlson@northernvermont.edu. Visit donorthcoworking.com.
- **Local 64, Montpelier:** Contact Lars Hasselblad Torres at lhtorres@gmail.com, or 540-0761. Visit local64.com. Lars is also the person to contact for more information on **VermontPass**, the cooperative network of coworking spaces in the state. Visit vermontpass.org.

Innovation Spaces VT/NH is a professional network with a dedicated Slack channel, Email Listserv, and Facebook Group that offers Quarterly Meetups. Contact Monique Priestley at mepriestley@gmail.com for more information.

Vermont Center for Emerging Technologies offers technical support and advice. Contact Sam Roach Gerber at sam@vcet.co, or visit vcet.co.

Funding

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) offers a number of grant opportunities that may align with a coworking space project. accd.vermont.gov or contact:

- Cindy Blondin – Municipal Planning Grants. cindy.blondin@vermont.gov, or 828-5219.
- Faith Ingulsrud – Zoning & village center development. faith.ingulsrud@vermont.gov, or 828-5228.
- Nathan Cleveland – Community Development Block Grants. nathan.cleveland@vermont.gov, or 585-5659.

The Vermont Economic Development Authority (VEDA) is the Vermont statewide economic development finance lender. VEDA has direct lending programs for businesses, so if an incubator was being established by a private developer, he/she could borrow from VEDA. Contact Heidi van Gulden at hvangulden@veda.org, or 828-0163. Visit veda.org.

USDA Rural Development: Contact Susan Poland, Business Programs Specialist at susan.poland@vt.usda.gov, or 828-6002. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt.

The US Economic Development Agency (EDA) provides a planning grant of \$40K-\$100K for incubator development. Contact Matthew Suchodolski at msuchodolski@eda.gov, or (215)-597-1242. Visit eda.gov.

Consider crowd-sourcing platforms like:

- Kickstarter, [kickstarter.com](https://www.kickstarter.com),
- Indiegogo, [indiegogo.com](https://www.indiegogo.com),
- and others.

Preservation Trust of Vermont can be a resource for preservation projects and other community initiatives and has some funding to help with planning and assessments.

Contact: Jenna Lapachinski at jenna@ptvermont.org, or 552-0659.

Vermont Community Foundation could be a funding source for economic and community development projects. Contact:

- Sarah Waring at swaring@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x283.
- Kevin Wiberg – Spark Community Grants. kwiberg@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x284.

Guides & Other Resources

Co-Working in Vermont is a detailed and comprehensive guide to help you get started:

<https://crowdfundingpr.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/coworking-in-vermont-a-starter-guide.pdf>.

Books:

- Working in the UnOffice: A Guide to Coworking for Indie Workers, Small Businesses, and Nonprofits by Genevieve DeGuzman & Andrew Tang.
- Startup Communities: Building an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in Your City by Brad Feld.

Global Communities

- Global Coworking Unconference Conference. Visit [gcuc.co](https://www.gcuc.co).
- Coworking Leadership (Global Online Forum & Slack). Visit [coworking.com](https://www.coworking.com).

Management Software

Software that several spaces are using that automates membership, billing, door access, and more:

- Proximity Space, [proximity.space](https://www.proximity.space) (Also allows members to travel between spaces using the same software).
- Nexodus, [nexodus.com](https://www.nexodus.com).

Build A Town Economic Development Committee

For many Vermont communities, strengthening the local economy is a top priority. What economic development looks like varies from town to town, so there's no single recipe for success. What follows is a collection of actions that have been effective in Vermont communities—you can choose the initiatives that are most relevant to your community.

Action Steps

1. Organize an initial action team.

To recruit members for an action team, start by identifying and inviting local businesspeople and interested community members. Keep in mind the variety of businesses in your community—large and small, storefront and less visible, home businesses and cottage industries.

Meet with existing business and economic groups in your region that might be interested in your work (regional Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, and others). Ask how your efforts can most effectively support each other.

Gather this group to agree on goals and initial priorities. (See “Setting Priorities for Action” p.13). Even if the committee was specifically formed around a pre-identified project (like downtown revitalization), it's important to begin by making sure everyone agrees on the committee's purpose and priorities.

2. Gather data on interests, needs and assets.

Learn more about how your economic development committee can be most useful to your community. Research and analysis tools that have helped many Vermont communities include:

- **Surveys**

- Survey existing businesses about their needs, wants, and ideas.
- Survey residents about desired retailers, manufacturers, workspaces or maker-spaces, and other ideas.

- **S.W.O.T Analysis:** Your work may be informed by conducting a strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (SWOT) analysis. Many models for this tool exist online. Remember that economic strengths are not limited to existing businesses. Strengths may include natural and historic resources, tourism potential, downtown or other physical infrastructure, human capital (skilled workers, youth, investors), strong sense of community, arts and traditions.

- **Creating indicators of success.** How will you know when you've begun to achieve your goals? Establish baseline economic indicators in a dashboard to measure progress.
- **Creating a comprehensive business listing.** Include large, visible businesses, as well as home businesses, consultants, and so on. This listing will not only help your team organize its initial efforts. It could also be useful to help businesses network, support each other, and share resources, and could eventually develop into a buy local or external marketing tool for your community.

3. Convene local economic stakeholders.

Stakeholders aren't only businesses. Everyone has an interest in a healthy economy and strong tax base.

- Build out the committee to expand engagement and buy-in. Think beyond local business people to include town government, artists and craftspeople, local youth, retirees, entrepreneurs of all kinds, and other community members.
- Educate and engage local officials such as the Select Board and planning commission. Get on their agenda at regular meetings.
- Even if some stakeholders don't choose to be a formal part of the committee, they can brief the committee on their economic activities and help you identify ways to build partnerships and support.
- For additional ideas on outreach, see "Inviting the Public" p.4.

4. Formulate and implement your action plan.

Based on the information you've gathered from existing businesses and residents, build an action plan and timeline for your group's priorities. Questions to consider while creating the plan include:

- What type of development makes sense your community? Do you want to foster new business initiatives? Expand existing development? Link with successful efforts already happening in your region?
- Who should be involved? Identify tasks for volunteers, and topics on which you may wish to engage technical experts.
- How might you create and market a list of the competitive advantages of doing business in your town?
- How will you handle outreach and public engagement?

Communities choose many different pathways depending on their priorities. Here are just some of the initiatives taken on by economic development committees across Vermont. Which seem right for your town?

- Seek changes to town plan language and zoning that encourages economic development. Create ordinances and incentives to encourage and/or require owners to create business opportunities.
- Invite state agencies that administer Act 250 permitting to come talk about permitting processes and how to make improvements locally.
- Inventory under-utilized properties and identify possible uses (including buildings and land).

- Conduct a feasibility study to identify possible uses/re-uses of properties; prioritize them based on the committee’s identified goals.
- Work with the Regional Economic Development Corporation (REDC) to match zoned industrial and commercial areas with potential businesses. Ensure that vacant properties are listed on DED’s Site Locator (<http://accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/properties>).
- Hire a consultant, possibly as an interim economic development coordinator. This person could:
 - Help obtain nonprofit 501(c)(3) status. This status improves ability to receive donations and funding, build membership, write town grants, and gain support and investment from local banks.
 - Help establish an economic development board and structure, identify funding sources for maintaining the organization, organize economic development campaigns and promotional events, and recruit volunteers to serve on the working committee.
 - Once 501(c)(3) status is established, hire a part- or full-time public administrator to undertake both economic and community development activities.
- Develop town revolving loan fund to support local business.
- Create or enhance a town website to promote local business
- Establish a marketing plan for the community.
- Create a pitch to attract businesses and develop a marketing and communications plan and pitch packet to engage new businesses. Establish a “Bragging Plan” to tell great stories about your community’s assets, activities and good news.
- Explore opportunities to expand lodging options. Look into collective advertising and identify who has spaces available for lodging.
- Create a Small Business Network to enable networking for entrepreneurs.
- Pursue Industrial Park development. Identify opportunities to expand available land for development, and work with the town to expand town-owned land or facilities.
- Create a Complete Streets policy and then follow up with a Complete Streets implementation plan. The plan could include sidewalk maintenance and new construction in town, convenient bike parking at key locations in town, signage in town for pedestrians, and mapping (See “Improve Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility” p.48).
- Implement a one percent sales and consumption tax to fund community and economic development projects (Note: This requires a city/town charter amendment and Legislative approval). Vermont examples include: Burlington, South Burlington, Winooski, Killington, Middlebury and St. Albans Town.

5. Share your stories and celebrate your efforts.

Every small success your committee has is an opportunity to build on your momentum and increase community interest. Communicate about your work through local media, social media, and other tools. (See “Communicating with the Community” p.7).

Resources

People Who Can Help

Your local **Regional Development Corporation (RDC)** and/or **Regional Planning Commission (RPC)** can offer technical support and help connect you with regional economic development professionals and initiatives in your area:

Regional Development Corporations (RDCs): <https://accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/resources/rdc>

Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs): <https://www.vapda.org/>

The US Small Business Administration (SBA) can help with guidance and support for businesses in the region. Contact: Darcy Carter at darcy.carter@sba.gov, or 828-4422 x203.

David White, of **White and Burke Associates**, has helped towns re-envision economic development initiatives. Contact: 862-1255 x 13.

Joan Goldstein, Vermont Commissioner of Economic Development is a great resource to consult with on economic development planning and strategies. Contact: joan.goldstein@vermont.gov, or 272-2399.

Joe Kasprzak in St. Johnsbury has been leading an effort in that town to revitalize downtown buildings and encourage economic development. He could share some strategies and best practices around next steps. Contact: jkasprzak@stjvt.com, or 748-3926 x3008.

Mary Peabody is a community economic development specialist at **University of Vermont Extension**. Contact: mary.peabody@uvm.edu, or 656-7232

Vermont Small Business Development Center. Contact: Steve Paddock spaddock@vtsbdc.org, or 989-9605.

Connect with the **Bethel Revitalization Initiative** to learn about grassroots revitalization and supporting entrepreneurs. Contact Rebecca Sanborn-Stone at rebecca@communityworkshopllc.com, or 379-4474. Visit bethelrevitalizationinitiative.org.

Funding

USDA Rural Development: Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

- Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training (TAT) Grant Program: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities-technical-assistance-and-training-grant>.
- Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG): <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/rural-business-development-grants>.

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) can help with general technical assistance, municipal planning grants, RBDGs, and tax credits. Visit accd.vermont.gov or contact:

- Cindy Blondin – Municipal planning grants. cindy.blondin@vermont.gov, or 828-5219.
- Faith Ingulsrud – Zoning & village center development. Contact: faith.ingulsrud@vermont.gov, or 828-5228.
- Nathan Cleveland – CDBGs. nathan.cleveland@vermont.gov, or 585-5659.
- Richard Amore – Planning and outreach. richard.amore@vermont.gov, or 828- 5229.
- Caitlin Corkins – Tax credits & designated villages. caitlin.corkins@vermont.gov, or 828-3047.

Vermont Community Foundation could be a funding source for economic and community development projects. Visit vermontcf.org, or contact:

- Sarah Waring at swaring@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x283.
- Kevin Wiberg – Spark Community Grants. kwiberg@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x284.

The Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC): Contact Tim Tierney at tim.tierney@vermont.gov, or 505-5496. Visit nbrc.gov.

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB)'s Rural Economic Development Initiative is available to help small communities apply for grants. Contact Liz Gleason at liz@vhcb.org, or 828-3370. Visit vhcb.org/redi.

Preservation Trust of Vermont can be a resource for preservation projects and other community initiatives and has some funding to help with planning and assessments. Contact Jenna Lapachinski at jenna@ptvermont.org, or 552-0659.

The Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC) provides small grants for Smart Growth. Contact Kate McCarthy at kmccartly@vnrc.org, or 223-2328.

There are different revolving loan fund opportunities available through:

- **Northeastern Vermont Development Association**, nvda.net/.
- **Community Capital of Vermont**: Contact Alex Rob at arob@communitycapitalvt.org, or 479-0167. Visit communitycapitalvt.org.
- **Northern Community Investment Corporation**: Contact Jon Freeman at jfreeman@ncic.org, or 748-5101. Visit ncic.org.
- **The Vermont Community Loan Fund**: Contact Will Belognia at will@vclf.org, or 223-4428. Visit investinvermont.org.

The Vermont Arts Council's Project Grants can be used to support community projects that brings the arts to the center of the community. Contact Sarah Mutrax at smutrux@vermontartscouncil.org, or 828-5425. Visit vermontartscouncil.org.

Develop Events that Strengthen Community

Event planning is its own art form. Of course, event planning rarely goes in a straight line—expect to circle back as new information emerges about funding, venues, participants, and because it's Vermont, the weather. But if you stay flexible and positive, the rewards of bringing people together are sweet, and the very act of dreaming and organizing together builds community. Here are some of the steps that have helped Vermont communities develop great events.

Action Steps

1. Gather and prepare with an events committee.

Bring together people in the community who are interested in creating events. You'll need a variety of skills and interests, and enthusiasm is a great asset. Together, take some of the following steps:

- Build a list of events that already happen in your community. Do they happen every year? Who puts them on? How are they shared?
- Talk with the people who have hosted events in recent years, to determine the gaps and needs. Is there a need for more support, coordination, or volunteers for existing events? What types of events are missing?
- Survey the community to determine what types of events people would like to participate in. This could be a formal survey (print and online) and/or could include conversations with community groups (local boards, clubs, youth/parent/senior groups, etc.), and other outreach.
- Identify any previous events or event series that may have gone dormant. Sometimes it's easier to revive or makeover an old successful program than start from scratch.
- Develop and maintain a local community events calendar. You can do this even before you launch any new events, and supplement as new events are created. It can become the one-stop shop to post happenings and to find out what's going on.

2. Plan your event(s).

Develop your event goals and objectives. What do you hope to achieve and how will you know if you have succeeded? For instance: Is this an educational or networking event? A gathering to celebrate a community element (history, nature, the arts)? Which audiences do you most wish to reach? How many people do you hope will attend? Is this a fundraiser, and if so, what is your fundraising goal? Set clear and reasonable goals and expectations. For tips, see "Setting Priorities for Action" p.13.

Determine how many events you want to plan for the year ahead. Different communities have chosen to organize:

- Annual events. Some towns host one signature celebration every year, such as a community-wide festival or Old Home Day celebration. These are often large-scale events that bring together partners from local business, restaurants, and volunteer organizations.
- Seasonal events. Some towns plan a large event three or four times throughout the year, for example, a winter carnival, a spring maple festival, a summer music or art festival, and a fall foliage or harvest fair.
- Recurring events. Some towns gather the community through a music series, community potlucks or picnics, open mic nights, trivia nights, or other traditions.
- One-time events. Perhaps it's a special anniversary, or perhaps you'd just like to try out a new idea. Who knows, it might catch on!

Establish clear roles for volunteers. What needs to be done and who will be responsible for each task? Identify the point person (and possibly a subcommittee) for each key activity. Establish a structure for regular check-ins so everyone stays on the same page. Categories include:

- Fundraising and Bookkeeping
- Promotion and Publicity: Mailings, advertising, online/social media
- Site Logistics: Building or tent details, stage, chairs and sound system. If this is an outdoor event, what is your plan for bad weather?
- Speakers, artists or entertainers (if relevant)
- Food (if it will be featured—plus plates, cups, utensils, napkins)
- Registration/RSVPs (if needed)
- Set Up and Clean Up

Secure a date and venue.

- Be sure you have chosen a date that gives ample time to organize and get the word out
- Double-check that the date doesn't compete with other big events (sports, school events or breaks, religious holidays).
- Be sure the venue is suitable for the size and needs of the gathering

Create an event timeline/master plan.

- Between now and the event, set deadlines for key elements of publicity, fundraising, and other categories

Build a day-of timeline for a seamless event. Plan out the flow of the day of the event, and who will be responsible for each task on that day, from set up to clean up. If possible, take a moment at the event itself to acknowledge and thank the key volunteers.

3. Establish Budget and Funding.

Develop a clear and detailed budget for your event. Be sure to include all the costs, from publicity to venue, rentals, food, talent. (See "Budgeting and Fundraising" p.31).

Develop a fundraising plan that covers the budget and is realistic based on your community and your goals. Sources of income might include:

- Admission fees
- Sponsorships and in-kind donations from area businesses. You can offer to thank businesses and place their ads/logos in event materials; highlight this as a business opportunity for increased visibility and community-oriented branding.
- Fundraising events (some groups hold one or two fundraisers annually to support costs of events throughout the year). These might include silent auctions, raffles, and other methods.
- Grants. It could be helpful to partner with an existing non-profit to help raise and process grant monies

4. Promote your event(s).

One of the most important part of hosting a successful community event is getting the word out and making sure everyone feels welcome. See “Inviting the Public” p.4 and “Communicating with the Community” p.7 for suggestions.

Reminders for promoting community events:

- Integrate efforts with neighboring municipalities’ events. Submit postings to surrounding towns’ and regional calendars.
- Consider sharing your event live on social media. Broadcasting through various media channels could help to spread awareness of the series and fuel interest in future events.
- Always use multiple methods of communication. Think about the many different ways people get their news, including flyers, posters, sandwich boards, newspaper/radio/tv calendars, websites, social media (Front Porch Forum, Facebook, list serves, etc.)

5. Check-in, share, celebrate.

Send thank-you notes to volunteers and key participants. Supporting people’s volunteer spirit will not only strengthen community, but also be critical to the success of future events.

Share your event’s successes. You can:

- Post on social media and through local networks – share pictures and stories
- Write a press release to local media with information on how many attended and upbeat quotes from participants. Include photos if possible.

If possible, post all recordings and material online in a publicly accessible central location, and link to this hub from other locations. Keeping records can increase your chances of obtaining future funding and sponsorship.

Record performances and share on social media.

Check in and debrief with the event committee after the event. What worked, what did you learn, what would you do differently in the future? Keep a list of successes and challenges to inform future event planning.

Just a sampling of the many types of events that have strengthened Vermont communities:

- Weekly open-mic nights featuring local talent
- Community scavenger hunt
- Book, clothing, or seed swaps
- “Fix-It Nights”: People with repair, maintenance, or sewing skills work together with community members to make minor fixes to electronics, mechanical equipment, or clothing
- Community play readings or community theater events
- Event series based on a theme, for instance: celebrating local history, diversity, a pressing local issue, features of the natural landscape, agricultural landmarks, astronomical events, and more
- Weekly concert series and street closings: “Friday Night Live” in Rutland
- Livestock shows
- Farmers markets
- Pick-up sporting events: Everything from soccer to ultimate Frisbee to softball to human foosball!
- “Business Hop” events or “crawls” featuring music, food tastings, or different activities at businesses around town
- Local “American Idol”-style singing competitions
- The “Newlywed Game” with local couples
- Maple festivals
- 5K Races or other running and/or biking events

Resources

People Who Can Help

Your local **Chamber of Commerce** can offer valuable help in connecting to the business community. To find the chamber nearest you, visit vtchamber.com/Organizations/Chambers-of-Commerce.

Your local **Regional Planning Commission (RPC)** will have experience hosting events and may be able to offer advice or technical assistance. Find yours here: <https://www.vapda.org/>.

The Vermont Calendar of Events is a statewide directory. Visit vermont.com/calendar_index.cfm.

The Vermont Arts Council may be able to offer helpful tips and resources for promoting events and connecting to local artist networks. Contact Kira Bacon, head of communications, at kbacon@vermontartscouncil.org, or 828-5422. Visit vermontartscouncil.org.

The Vermont Creative Network, an offshoot of the Arts council, is a great opportunity to connect with other community organizers across the state. Visit vermontartscouncil.org/vermont-creative-network.

Funding

Vermont Community Foundation may have grants available for community projects or events, especially where they will connect the community and/or engage youth. Visit vermontcf.org, or contact:

- Sarah Waring at swaring@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x283.
- Kevin Wiberg – Spark Community Grants. kwiberg@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x284.

Art Impact Grants, at **The Vermont Arts Council** can be a funding source. Contact Michele Bailey at mbailey@vermontartscouncil.org, or 828-3294. Visit vermontartscouncil.org.

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) may have resources for funding and can offer technical support, especially in Designated Villages and Downtowns. Visit accd.vermont.gov or contact:

- Gary Holloway, Downtown Program Coordinator, at gary.holloway@state.vt.us, or 828-3220.
- Cindy Blondin, Grants Specialist, at cindy.blondin@vermont.gov, or 828-5219.
- Nathan Cleveland, Community Development Block Grants Specialist, at nathan.cleveland@vermont.gov, or 585-5659.

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. You can search the **Vermont Foundations Directory** using keywords like “community” “events” “youth” or other words that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area. Find the database here: <https://fdovermont.foundationcenter.org/>.

Examples of Local Events and Events Committees Around the State

Wallingford Day/Wallingford Events, Communications, and Engagement Task Force.

Contact wallingfordday@gmail.com.

Wednesdays on the Waterfront, Newport: wednesdaysonthewaterfront.com.

Island Pond Chamber of Commerce visitislandpond.com/events-and-festivals and

Brighton Recreation facebook.com/IslandPondAGreatPlaceToLiveAndPlay.

Neshobe Summer Concert Series, Brandon. Visit brandon.org/events-and-happenings.

Improve and Develop Housing

Many Vermont communities name housing as a pressing issue. Whether your community is focused on attracting new residents, retaining current families, diversifying housing for a range of income levels, or other goals, improved housing will serve both economic and social needs.

Action Steps

1. Convene a team and assess the local housing landscape.

Bring together community members interested in improving and developing housing. Interested participants might include local leaders, builders, potential housing residents, housing advocacy groups, and local citizens. Together, conduct fundamental background research:

- Inventory the local housing stock. Consider such questions as:
 - How many of each type of unit exist in town?
 - What is their condition, and their price point?
 - Some projects are partly driven by an underused or even derelict building that presents an opportunity. Are there underutilized properties that would be suitable for redevelopment?
- Conduct a needs assessment to identify demand for specific unit types, based on the demographic and economic makeup of the community. Use multiple sources of information: consult with local leaders, gather resident input at community events, and/or distribute a public survey. Your Regional Planning Commission can be a helpful resource in conducting this analysis, as they may already have much of the data. Consider such issues as:
 - What housing needs exist now, and how might needs change in the future?
 - What are the most serious gaps: Senior housing? Family units? Workforce housing? Single rooms or small units?
 - Are you looking to expand permanently affordable rental units or expand home ownership?
- What other local housing projects have been successful in the past? Connect with local experience and learn from past initiatives.

2. Determine your project priorities.

Host one or several events to bring people interested in housing issues together with potential developers, and identify points of collaboration or mutual support. Not only will diverse perspectives add value to the project, but the planning process itself can serve as a launch point for future collaboration between groups. For ideas, see “Inviting the Public” p.4. Potential stakeholders might include (but are not limited to):

- Realtors
- Landlords

- Service providers
- Shelter operators
- Faith groups
- Economic development professionals
- Renters
- Young people
- Area residents

Based on these discussions and the information gathered from the housing inventory and needs assessment, develop a plan for a housing project that suits the community needs. For process ideas, see “Setting Priorities for Action” p.13.

It can be helpful at this stage to partner with housing professionals, as they can to help navigate regulatory, logistic and financing hurdles. See below for contacts.

3. Determine a site.

Research and identify a location for your project. Work with housing and/or historic preservation professionals to determine the best location, based on the type of project you will pursue and the community’s needs.

- If you decide to build a new development, research and identify land that is currently on the market or municipally owned.
- If your project involves the redevelopment of an existing building, inventory buildings in the community that could be repurposed for housing.

Feasibility studies with engineers and/or contractors may be needed to determine the best site for your project. See below for resources for funding and identifying the right contractor.

Connect with the local municipal or regional planning department to review existing building codes, zoning by-laws, or downtown designation programs that may impact development.

4. Engage the community around initial design and scale.

Work with housing professionals to create an initial design for the project.

Invite the community to share their reactions and suggestions about the design.

Engagement now will not only help inform and improve the design at a key moment, but increase community understanding of the project.

5. Develop a funding plan.

What state and federal programs exist to help fund housing development that might apply to the project? Contact ACCD or HUD for guidance and information on specific projects.

Are there municipal actions that can be taken to leverage local funding? Successful examples in other communities include housing trust funds, property tax incentives, and revolving loan funds.

Work with your group of community stakeholders to identify potential donors or philanthropic groups.

Work with an experienced developer to create a budget for the project and match it with available funding sources.

6. Identify professionals to implement the project.

Put out a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a developer to lead the housing project and carry out the proposed design.

With the developer, put out an RFP for a General Contractor to lead construction.

Build a plan with the developer for ongoing property management and maintenance. The developer may lead management in the long term or contract with a third-party management entity.

7. Keep the community in the loop.

As early as possible in the process, designate one or several point people to inform and engage the community about your efforts. They can take the lead on posting regular updates and fielding inquiries from the public.

Develop a plan to share regular updates with the broader community about status of the project. Consider engaging local media channels, community list serves, social media pages, public bulletin spaces, local mailings and newsletters. For ideas, see “Communicating with the Community” p.7.

Resources

People Who Can Help

Your Regional Planning Commission (RPC) can be a key partner in helping to plan for and develop a local housing project. Find yours here: <https://www.vapda.org/>

Community Land Trusts and **Housing Development Corporations** are key local and regional partners in local housing development. Connect with the group that leads for your region:

- **Addison County Community Trust:** Call 877-2626, or visit addisontrust.org.
- **Battleboro Area Affordable Housing:** Call 246-2224, or visit baahvermont.org.
- **Cathedral Square Corporation** (statewide): Call 863-2224 or visit cathedralsquare.org.
- **Champlain Housing Trust:** Call 862-6244, or visit champlainhousingtrust.org. (Chittenden, Franklin & Grand Isle Counties)
- **Downstreet Housing & Community Development (formerly CVCLT):** call 476-4493, or visit downstreet.org. (Central Vermont)
- **Housing Trust of Rutland County:** Call 775-3139, or visit housingrutland.org.
- **Housing Vermont:** Call 863-8424, or visit www.hvt.org. (statewide)
- **Lamoille Housing Partnership:** Call 888-5714, or visit lamoillehousing.org.

- **Randolph Area Community Development:** Call 728-4305, or visit racdc.com. (Braintree, Brookfield, and Randolph)
- **Rural Edge:** Call 535-3555, or visit ruraledge.org. (Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans Counties)
- **Shires Housing:** Call 442-8139, or visit shireshousing.org (Southwest Vermont)
- **Twin Pines Housing Trust:** Call 291-7000, or visit www.tphtrust.org. (Bethel, Bradford, Bridgewater, Fairlee, Hartford, Hartland, Newbury, Norwich, Pomfret, Royalton, Sharon, Strafford, Thetford, Topsham, Tunbridge, Vershire, W. Fairlee, W. Windsor, Windsor, Woodstock; and adjacent New Hampshire towns)
- **Windham and Windsor Housing Trust:** Call 254-4604 or visit homemattershere.org.
- **Winooksi Housing Authority:** Call 655-2360, or visit winooksihousing.org.

The Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB) makes grants and loans for the acquisition, rehabilitation and construction of affordable housing by nonprofit housing organizations. They can provide technical assistance and help to share successful projects in other communities. Contact Martin Hahn, Housing Director at mhahn@vhcb.org, or 828-3259. Visit vhcb.org.

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) provides some great resources around planning for housing in your community. Visit accd.vermont.gov/housing/planning

Housing Vermont can advise on everything from where to go for a feasibility analysis or market study, to funding construction. Visit hvt.org, or contact:

- Kathy Beyer at kbeyer@hvt.org, or 863-8424.
- Nancy Owens, President at nowens@hvt.org, or 343-3818.

In the Upper Valley, **Vital Communities'** Workforce Housing Program can be a valuable partner. Contact Mike Kiess at michael@vitalcommunities.org, or 291-9100 x113. Visit vitalcommunities.org.

Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition (VHFA) can be a valuable resource in connecting to Montpelier and federal policymakers. Contact Erhard Mahnke at erhardm@vtaffordablehousing.org, or 660-9484. Visit vtaffordablehousing.org.

Vermont State Housing Authority: Contact Kathleen Berk, Housing Program Director, at kathyb@vsha.org, or 828-3020.

Funding

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) can help with overall planning advice, downtown programs and more. Visit accd.vermont.gov or contact:

- Cindy Blondin – Municipal planning grants. cindy.blondin@vermont.gov, or 828-5219.
- Faith Ingulsrud – Zoning & village center development. Contact: faith.ingulsrud@vermont.gov, or 828-5228.
- Nathan Cleveland – CDBGs. nathan.cleveland@vermont.gov, or 585-5659.

- Richard Amore – Planning and outreach. richard.amore@vermont.gov, or 828- 5229.
- Caitlin Corkins – Tax credits & designated villages. caitlin.corkins@vermont.gov, or 828-3047.

USDA Rural Development can provide funding for community housing projects. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

The Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) can be a grant funding source for planning or project development. Contact Tim Tierney at tim.tierney@vermont.gov, or 505-5496. Visit nbro.gov.

Guides and Other Resources

A comprehensive listing of Housing organizations and agencies in Vermont, compiled by the Department of Housing and Community Development: haccd.vermont.gov/sites/accdnew/files/documents/H-DIRECTORYOFORGANIZATIONS.pdf.

Market Your Community to Visitors

Many of the things that make our Vermont towns great only reveal themselves over time; it can be hard for tourists to fully appreciate some of the slower treasures of this great state. But every community has assets that can be appreciated even by passers-by. Highlighting these in your town invites visitors to become traveling ambassadors for the community and to come back soon, which boosts local economies. It can even help inspire the arrival of new full-time residents and all the vitality they bring.

Action Steps

1. Convene local partners.

Convene a meeting of local business owners, municipal leaders, representatives of your Chamber of Commerce, downtown organization, if you have one, and other interested residents to discuss the current tourism landscape and explore a common vision for the future.

Be sure to include those in the tourism sector, including restaurateurs, B&B owners, recreation organizations, and other businesses or services who stand to benefit from increased visitor traffic. Who has helpful experiences and perspectives to bring to the table?

Discuss your common goals, and consider formalizing this group as a steering committee for your marketing efforts. For organizing tools, see “Developing a Community Vision” p.10 and “Setting Priorities for Action” p.13.

2. Inventory your community’s tourism assets, needs, and opportunities.

Making a list of all the assets, needs, and opportunities in your community is a helpful early step in assessing the local tourist potential and can be used later to augment existing promotional materials. Consider:

- What might a first-time visitor notice about your community? Brainstorm a list, keeping in mind food, lodging, breweries, festivals and seasonal events, museums, hiking and biking trails, skiing and other outdoor recreation, water bodies, farms, wildlife, vistas, cultural landmarks, and the other elements that local people appreciate.
- What elements of your community might be lesser known, but would be appreciated by someone from out of town if they learned about them? These might include a back-road covered bridge, an orchard or farmstand, historical sites, or a nice place to walk by the river.
- What services would a visitor need to make their stay enjoyable?
- How would a visitor know how to discover the best of your community?

3. Develop a community marketing campaign.

Together, your group can look at ways to put out the word about your community. Here are some of the techniques used successfully in Vermont communities. For outreach ideas, see “Communicating with the Community” p.7.

- Come up with a “pitch” –a narrative that you can share with the broader community about the importance of visitors to the local economy. This can be helpful in raising awareness of your initiative and gathering community support.
- A unified message or brand aimed at visitors can be to everyone’s benefit, and can even boost local pride of place. Your partnership could develop shared materials—brochures, town maps, business directories—to engage visitors’ attention and ensure that more businesses have opportunities to market themselves.
- Use your inventory from Step 2 to create a local directory of business and attractions. Identify any existing promotional materials and see if there are ways to consolidate them.
- Strategize the placement of hard-copy materials in visible central locations and businesses around town, and in neighboring communities if possible.
- Inventory and update downtown or village signage to help better direct visitors to local amenities and businesses.
- In the age of the smartphone traveler, having an effective online presence can be as important as robust hard-copy materials. Conduct a virtual inventory by entering likely queries into common search engines to see what resources pop up. Consider partnering with the municipality or downtown organization to create a unified online visitor portal, and work with a web consultant to maximize visibility. This central hub could offer high-quality photo or video content, and a hyperlinked version of the local directory, providing visitors with a single gateway into the local community.
- Audit the community’s social media presence, and work with someone technologically savvy to build a social media campaign with unifying hashtags that highlight community happenings and local assets. This could be a local volunteer or grant-funded part-time position, depending on the scope of the campaign.
- Connect the campaign to local businesses and organizations. Leverage the partnerships you have developed to implement changes that make the town friendlier to visitors. These might include extended weekend and evening hours for businesses and restaurants, local street fairs or collaborative markets, guided tours, and other welcoming activities.

Resources

People Who Can Help

The Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing can be a source for technical assistance. Contact Heather Pelham, Commissioner at heather.pelham@vermont.gov, or 477-2727. Visit accd.vermont.gov/tourism.

Your Regional Development Corporation could be a partner in helping to design and implement a plan for marketing and tourism. See the list here: <https://accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/resources/rdc>.

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) could provide technical assistance and help to connect to communities that have run successful marketing campaigns. Contact Gary Holloway at gary.holloway@vermont.gov, or 522-2444. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development.

Funding

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) can be a source for planning grants or other types of grants to help boost marketing and tourism initiatives. Visit accd.vermont.gov or contact:

- Faith Ingulsrud – Zoning & village center development. Contact: faith.ingulsrud@vermont.gov, or 828-5228.
- Richard Amore – Planning and outreach. richard.amore@vermont.gov, or 828- 5229.

USDA Rural Development can be a grant source to help support major marketing and tourism efforts that will drive economic development. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

Vermont Towns with Successful Marketing and Tourism Initiatives

- Island Pond Chamber of Commerce
- Better Middlebury Partnership
- St. Johnsbury Chamber of Commerce
- Kingdom Trails in East Burke
- Bennington Chamber of Commerce – “The Shires of Vermont”
- Rutland County – I Love Rutland Campaign

Advance Outdoor Recreation and Trails

It's no surprise that in the beautiful Green Mountain State, many communities have identified trails as a great way to connect. Whether you're interested in hiking, biking, river access, skiing, snowmobiling, ATVs, or other activities, here are some tips that have been effective across Vermont in creating and maintaining trails and boosting the recreation economy.

Action Steps

1. Create an outdoor recreation and trails committee.

Begin by talking with existing groups whose interests might overlap yours (town planning and conservation commission, regional trails and conservation groups). Ask how your work can most effectively connect with theirs.

Recruit an outdoor recreation and trails team by identifying and inviting community members who could contribute skills and information. You'll need a variety of skills, and everyone has something to contribute, from identifying interested landowners, to planning and coordination, to mapping, to actually getting out tools and building trails.

Work with the committee to agree on goals and initiatives. Even if the committee was specifically formed around a pre-identified project, make sure everyone agrees on the committee's purpose and priorities.

2. Gather data on community interests, needs, and assets.

A community survey of relevant stakeholders (residents, schools, youth, second homeowners, visitors) would help you identify recreational interests and needs. This survey could focus on a specific project, or could ask broader questions to help you identify priorities. If you use an online survey, make paper copies available for those who don't use the internet.

Build on previous efforts. Roll out maps, revisit past trail plans, and bring in resources and leaders who can help you understand past efforts. Even if projects weren't completed, you can learn from their experience, and everyone will appreciate you respecting past efforts.

Know your strengths. Drawing on the experience of local groups and community members, conduct an inventory of existing trails and recreational opportunities.

Consult trail users. Identify and engage various user groups, both formal and informal (hikers, ATV and snowmobile riders, bikers, paddlers). Don't forget other key stakeholders (schools, youth, business owners, municipal leadership). If there are statewide or regional trails in your community, connect with the groups that oversee them (e.g. The Green Mountain Club, the Catamount Trail Association, the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, and others).

3. Formulate and implement an action plan.

Based on the information you've gathered, build an action plan and timeline for the group's priorities. The plan should include:

- Working with experts and resource groups (see suggestions below) to identify potential funding opportunities and develop a funding/fund raising plan for next steps.
- Identifying and recruiting volunteers and/or contractors who will lead project implementation.
- Identifying technical experts to map the project. This may also include other trail resources in the community, or a map of the specific project.
- If relevant, include a strategy to engage and build trust with landowners. This may include creating information packages to use in building understanding of your group and its goals. This will be especially necessary where an easement or permission is needed.
- For process ideas, see "Setting Priorities for Action" p.13.

4. Communicate, engage, share and celebrate.

Develop signage for your specific project and/or for town recreational assets to create a comprehensive system that highlights, shares, and celebrates local recreational assets.

Share maps and information broadly to build public engagement and interest. Some strategies may include:

- Creating a website, brochures, or community calendar that provide information about recreational opportunities.
- Developing a strategy to "brand and sell" your town's recreation opportunities and coordinating with local businesses and the welcome center to share recreation information with visitors.
- Hosting a town cleanup day on appropriate sites.
- Cultivating a list of community recreation volunteers—both to coordinate and lead programming
- Holding community trails events and other outings for all ages to bring the community together and draw attention to and celebrate outdoor recreation assets.

For additional outreach ideas, see "Communicating with the Community" p.7.

Resources

People Who Can Help

If the community is interested in mountain bike trail development, the **Vermont Mountain Bike Association (VMBA)** can help the development of trails and support the organization of a local chapter. If a local chapter exists, connect directly with them. Find out if there is a local chapter at vmba.org. Contact Tom Stuessy, Executive Director at tom@vmba.org.

The **VT Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation** can provide guidance and technical support for trail development and improvement, especially on public lands. Contact Jessica Savage at jessica.savage@vermont.gov, or 249-1230. Visit fpr.vermont.gov.

Your **Regional Planning Commission** could help with mapping and planning for outdoor recreation and trails. Find the one for your area here: <https://www.vapda.org/>.

If the work is in an area near or in the **National Forest**, the U.S. National Forest Service can be an important partner. Regional offices are located in Rutland, Manchester, and Rochester. For contact information, visit fs.usda.gov/detail/gmfl/about-forest/offices.

The **Vermont Youth Conservation Corp** can be a resource to support trail building and development. Contact Breck Knauft, Executive Director, at breck.knauft@vycc.org, or 434-3969 x110. Visit vycc.org.

For river access or other river-related projects, the **Vermont River Conservancy** could be a partner. Contact Steve Libby, Executive Director, at slibby@vermontriverconservancy.org, or visit vermontriverconservancy.org.

The **Vermont Land Trust** could help with recreation project development and/or public land conservation or acquisition. To find your regional contact, visit vlt.org/contact.

The **Vermont Trail Finder** project, run by the Upper Valley Trails Alliance, is a statewide promotional tool for Vermont trails: trailfinder.info

The **Vermont Urban and Community Forestry Program** provides technical assistance for towns that are protecting, maintaining, or acquiring community forests. They have a toolkit for public engagement and planning around public forests and recreation. Contact Kate Forrer, Community Forestry Specialist, at kate.forrer@uvm.edu, or 476-2003. Visit vtcommunityforestry.org.

The **Northern Forest Canoe Trail** is a resource for questions and support around riverfront recreational access. Contact Karrie Thomas, Executive Director, at karrie@northernforestcanoetrail.org or 496-0755. Visit northernforestcanoetrail.org.

The **Trust for Public Land** can provide technical assistance and connect with grant funding to make public land more accessible. Contact Kate Wanner, Project Manager, at kate.wanner@tpl.org, or 223-1373 x27. Visit tpl.org.

The **Vermont ATV Sportsman's Association** has access to state funding and can offer expertise for all aspects of trail planning, land easements, regulatory assistance, trail management and policing. Contact Danny Hale, Executive Director, at director@vtvasa.org, or 353-6608. Visit vtvasa.org.

The **National Park Service** "Rivers and Trails" Program helps groups well beyond the parks themselves plan, map and develop trails. Contact Jennifer Waite at JenniferWaite@nps.gov or 457-3368 x21. Visit nps.gov/nrcr/programs/rtca/index.html.

Funding

VT Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation.

- Recreation Trail Program grants could be used to assess trail conditions, maintenance and for capital improvements: fpr.vermont.gov/recreational-trails-program.
- The Agency of Natural Resources Land and Water Conservation Fund: fpr.vermont.gov/land-and-water-conservation-fund.

Lake Champlain Basin Program, a Champlain Valley Natural Heritage Partnership stakeholders committee, helps direct grant opportunities and funding for recreational projects. Contact Dave Southwick at director@fcrccvt.com. Visit lcbp.org.

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board offers Public Outdoor Recreation Grants. Contact Karen Freeman at karen.freeman@vhcb.org, or 828-5067. Visit vhcb.org/our-programs/conservation/non-ag-conservation

USDA Rural Development has a variety of grant and loan programs available to support community infrastructure including signage, community facilities or trails. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

The **Vermont Agency of Transportation** (VTrans) has a Bike and Pedestrian Grant Program. Contact Jon Kaplan at jon.kaplan@vermont.gov, or 828-0059. Visit vtrans.vermont.gov/highway/local-projects/bike-ped.

The Northern Border Regional Commission could fund major recreation development projects, especially with economic development potential. Visit nbrc.gov.

Vermont Housing Conservation Board has funding to help local groups hire grant writers to fund community and economic development projects. Contact Liz Gleason at liz@vhcb.org or 828-3370. Visit vhcb.org/redi.

The **Department of Buildings and General Services** offers Building Communities Grant Programs that could support recreational facility improvements in Vermont communities. Contact Judy Bruneau at judy.bruneau@vermont.gov, or 828-3519. Visit bgs.vermont.gov/commissioner/building-communities-grants.

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. You can search the **Vermont Foundations Directory** using keywords like “recreation” “conservation” “youth” or other words that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area. Find the database here: fdovermont.foundationcenter.org.

Outdoor recreation examples across VT:

- **The Bristol Trail Network** bristolreclub.org/bristol-trail-network
- **RASTA** would be an excellent model as they worked through connection with the National Forest rastavt.org
- **Ascutney Outdoors** ascutneyoutdoors.org
- **Bennington Area Trail System (BATS)** batsvt.org.

Build A Community Park or Green Space

Nothing says summer in Vermont like an outdoor venue where the community can gather. And of course these public spaces can be enjoyed during fall foliage, snowy adventures, and spring outings as well. Whether your community is dreaming of a recreation space, a public garden, a concert venue, or another public space, it is useful to consider the steps listed below.

Action Steps

1. Build a green space team.

Establish a community park or green space team or committee. Invite community members, outdoor enthusiasts, business leaders and town officials with a variety of perspectives and expertise. (For tips, see “Inviting the Public” p.4).

Initially, team members can collaborate on the research and project prioritization described in the next steps. Once established, the group could also take on:

- Community outreach: Create a comprehensive communications plan and strategize ways to keep the community informed and involved in the park development process.
- Fund Development: Budget new initiatives and connect with potential sources of funding.
- Permits and Regulations: Navigate the legal conditions necessary for development, and partner with the municipality to ensure local zoning standards are met.

2. Take stock: What's here, what's working, and what's not?

Inventory what parks or other outdoor spaces currently exist in the community, and how they are being utilized. You can use a variety of research tools:

- Distribute a public survey (both paper and online). List existing parks and outdoor community spaces, and ask respondents to evaluate how satisfied they are with these. Leave space for them to list additional places you might not have considered. Ask what types of space they would like to see in the future, and whether they have ideas for new locations.
- Connect with your local recreation committee/department if you have one. They may have valuable information on current usage, as well as expertise to lend on upkeep and design.
- Consult with local clubs or recreation groups to learn of their priorities.
- Check your town plan to see whether and how parks and green spaces are prioritized.

What community groups or organizations currently utilize and/or maintain existing green spaces, and how? Would any of them be potential sponsors or partners for future expansion?

Research any past efforts to develop community green spaces. If they were successful, what were the keys to their success? If not, what were the major impediments?

Are current parks and outdoor spaces accessible to all community members? Are there any populations who can't use existing spaces due to physical accessibility, entry fees, or other barriers? How could future project improve public access?

3. Identify project and location.

Based on your research and the ideas gathered from the community, identify the type of community green space you want to develop, and the qualities it should have. Is it a park? A community recreational space? A public garden? An outdoor music venue?

- Solicit ideas from the public about various design options. A great way to generate engagement at this stage is to host a facilitated public workshop. Here, interested community members help refine and augment the ideas gathered in the community survey. The workshop can result in a set of recommendations for the core committee's final review. See "Setting Priorities for Action" p.13.
- Will you be revitalizing an existing public park or green space?
 - This option is often easier than constructing a new one from scratch; logistical and legal hurdles are fewer, and the cost is lower.
 - If the property you hope to redesign is currently publicly owned, partnership with the municipality will be key. Work with your local planning department to identify parcels that are currently underutilized and improvements that could be made for maximum impact.
- Will you be building a new park or greenspace?
 - In this case, it can be helpful to partner with a local real estate professional or inspector to obtain help with the process of property evaluation and purchase.
 - Be sure to thoroughly vet all parcels for environmental or physical hazards, and conduct an in-depth analysis of past ownership.
 - Consider site location, accessibility and ease of access for transit-dependent populations, as well as proximity to local businesses and public amenities like Wi-Fi and restrooms.

4. Develop a budget and funding plan.

Determine the ownership structure for the proposed community space. Will it be municipally-owned (and maintained), or is it a privately-owned property available for public use? There are advantages and disadvantages to both options.

- If the space is to be municipally owned, it may be possible to fund some of the development through a public bond or by leveraging a local options tax. Both of these actions necessitate a town vote and thorough public outreach and involvement.
- Alternatively, a non-profit entity can be created to own and operate the space. This option allows for more independence in decision making. However, it precludes certain funding sources, and usually necessitates the establishment of a governing board.

Whatever ownership structure you decide, it is important to connect to state agencies and philanthropic advisors early on in the process (see resources section below).

It can be helpful to divide the budgeting process into two phases: 1) (re)development and 2) ongoing operations, since funding sources for each phase may vary.

For more on finances, see “Budgeting and Fundraising” p.31.

5. Understand the legal conditions for development.

Depending on the site chosen and the extent of redevelopment planned, it will probably be necessary to communicate with state and federal agencies to navigate the regulatory landscape of the project. Your regional planning commission can be an important partner in helping to connect to the appropriate partners, and in completing the required paperwork.

6. Celebrate, communicate, and involve the community.

Large-scale, extensive revitalization or development can take years to complete, and may be confusing for the public to follow. It is vital to communicate regularly about your progress, celebrate incremental successes, and work actively to maintain community interest and involvement in the project.

- Post regular updates on the development process through municipal communications channels, social media platforms, and in partnerships with local tradition media. (For tips, see “Communicating with the Community” p.7).
- Ask local champions to write letters of support and post them in newspapers and on community listservs or local forums.
- Much of the construction work may be done by experienced contractors, but there will also be opportunities for hands-on community participation. Use your communications plan to put out a call to the community for help. Hosting a community work day, organizing specific tasks for both skilled and unskilled volunteers, can be a great way to build enthusiasm and might defray some labor costs.
- Partner with local food vendors and musical talent to make work days lively community events. Be sure to gather participant contact information to build a list of volunteers and supporters.
- Collaborate with a broad array of community organizations and social groups to brainstorm uses for your park/greenspace. Engage with local artists and creative leaders about the possibility of public installations or performances.
- Connect with local schools to identify areas for integration with local curriculum.
- Be sure park events are included in your community events calendar.
- Once the project is complete, host a kickoff event to celebrate the project and thank everyone involved. Invite the community, people from neighboring towns, and the media. This can be a great opportunity to highlight programs or events scheduled for the new greenspace.

Resources

People Who Can Help

Local conservation partners could be helpful in supporting this work. A community group could reach out individually, or invite them to a meeting to discuss the project. This may include:

- **Vermont Rivers Conservancy** - Contact Steve Libby at slibby@vermontriverconservancy.org, or 318-5954. Visit vermontriverconservancy.org.
- **Vermont Land Trust** – Find the right contact for your region here: vlt.org/contact
- **Vermont Nature Conservancy** – Contact 229-4425 or visit nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/vermont.
- **Trust for Public Land** – Contact Kate Wanner at kwanner@tpl.org, or visit tpl.org/our-work/vermont.

Your **Regional Planning Commission** could help with planning, mapping, and identifying funding opportunities. Find the RPC for your region here: <https://www.vapda.org/>.

The **Urban and Community Forestry Program** could provide technical assistance and a detailed toolkit that can help to develop local green spaces. Contact Elise Schadler at elise.schadler@vermont.gov, or 522-6015. Visit vtcommunityforestry.org.

The **Vermont Youth Conservation Corps** sometimes partners with communities to help design and build outdoor projects. Contact Breck Knauft at breck.knauft@vycc.org, or 434-3969. Visit vycc.org.

Your **County Forester** can be a partner in any project that involves tree planting, forest conservation, or your local Town Forest. Find your County Forester here: fpr.vermont.gov/forest/list-vermont-county-foresters.

Check in with your **county forester or a botanist** around selection of ornamental trees, bushes, or other plantings. They can help find species that are suited to the location and that won't pose any ecological risks. The **UVM Extension Master Gardener program** may be a good place to look for assistance uvm.edu/extension/mastergardener.

Funding

The **VT Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD)** has several grant programs that could help to support community park or green space development:

- **Municipal Planning Grants**: Contact Jenni Lavoie at jennifer.lavoie@vermont.gov, or 828-1948. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/municipal-planning-grant
- **Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP)**: Contact Cindy Blondin at cindy.blondin@vermont.gov, or 828-5219. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp.
- The **Vermont Designated Downtown and Village Center Programs** could help access funds or tax credits. Contact Gary Holloway at gary.holloway@vermont.gov (Downtowns) or Richard Amore at richard.amore@vermont.gov (Village Centers).

The **Department of Forest Parks and Recreation's** Recreation Trails Grant Program could help support local greenspace and recreation projects. Contact Sherry Winnie, the Recreation Trails Program Administrator at sherry.winnie@state.vt.us, or 760-8450. Visit fpr.vermont.gov/recreational-trails-program#:~:text=Vermont's%20RTP%20grant%20awards%20typically,and%20maintain%20public%20recreational%20use.

The **VT Department of Buildings and General Services** offers a Recreational Facilities Grant program that could help to support parks, playgrounds, and other community facilities. Contact Judy Bruneau at judy.bruneau@vermont.gov, or 828-3519. Visit bgs.vermont.gov/commissioner/building-communities-grants.

USDA Rural Development has a Community Facilities Grant Program that could support initiatives in this arena. To learn more contact Misty Sinsigalli at msinsigalli@usda.gov or 828-6069. Visit <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs/community-facilities-programs>.

The **New England Grassroots Environment Fund** might be a small funding source for seeding community projects. Visit grassrootsfund.org.

The **Vermont Housing and Conservation Board** may have grant funding available to support local conservation initiatives. Contact Karen Freeman at karen.freeman@vhcb.org or 828-5067. Visit vhcb.org/our-programs/conservation.

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. You can search the **Vermont Foundations Directory** using keywords like “recreation” “conservation” “youth” or other words that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area. Find the database here: fdovermont.foundationcenter.org.

Revitalize Your Downtown or Village Center

Many of Vermont's downtowns and village centers were built in an age and economy that's very different from the one we live in today. While our downtowns may boast a variety of impressive buildings and other infrastructure, some could use a revitalization of energy, creativity, and an economic boost—and Vermonters are making it happen.

Action Steps

1. Gather a team to explore your opportunities.

Gather a diverse group of people who are interested in downtown/village revitalization. Include local businesspeople and town or village officials, and don't forget others who have a stake in a vibrant town center such as young people, retirees, artists, and others. (See "Inviting the Public" p.4). Together, take a comprehensive look at what the area looks like today using some of the following steps:

- Conduct an inventory and make a map of existing downtown/village resources including businesses, restaurants, bike, pedestrian, and recreational infrastructure, parking, apartment blocks, cultural amenities, historic features, local geographic or geologic features.
- Research patterns of change that have contributed to the current state of your downtown. If downtown used to be a busier place, what made it that way? Were there certain business departures that left gaps? Have traffic patterns changed ways that make downtown less accessible to foot traffic? How might what you've learned inform your revitalization efforts?
- Consult your town plan to see whether it offers any guidance regarding the downtown area.
- Determine whether your town has a Designated Downtown or a Designated Village Center. If so, be sure to contact your local downtown organization (if you have a Designated Downtown) or any group in town focused on your village center. It will be critical to partner on these efforts. If your community does not have a designation, pursuing a designation could help you connect to key resources and support. (See Resources below.)

2. Solicit community ideas and create a vision.

Local stakeholders may have radically different visions for the use of space and the types of visitors they hope to attract. Since downtown revitalization can be lengthy and logistically challenging, it is imperative to begin with a shared vision. This may mean making compromises, but in the long run, it is worth it to have as many allies in the project as possible.

- Consider hosting a public event, such as a potluck or block party, and inviting the whole community to come share their ideas for the future of downtown.
- Be creative: You could have a table where kids draw or describe their vision; or poster boards where residents jot down the elements they'd most like to see in a revitalized downtown. You could connect with a local artist to do live sketches of ideas generated, which could be used to determine tasks and strategies that would need to occur to reach those visions.
- This event could be paired with a community survey distributed online and by mail asking for similar input on the future of downtown.
- See "Developing A Community Vision" p.10 for more ideas.

3. Develop a downtown or village master plan.

What needs to change? Laying out a thorough and comprehensive master plan is no small task, but having a robust document to guide the revitalization process is a must.

- Engage actively with your local planning commission or planning department. They can help ensure that the plan you develop is integrated into the larger municipal plan and can be a resource in accessing specific mapping/layout tools.
- Outline the conceptual alterations to the streetscape, including safety and accessibility upgrades, new infrastructure, parking, building renovations, parks and green spaces, access to local waterways, and so on. (For more ideas, see "Improve Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility" p.48 and "Build a Park or Green Space" p.104).
- It can be helpful to delineate projects into two categories: Those that can be accomplished in the short term, and those which necessitate a longer-term commitment. Focusing initially on the short-term projects can help maintain community enthusiasm for the project, and signal to stakeholders that progress is being made.
- Consider engaging a community development professional to help draft the Master Plan and see the project through to implementation. They could help you with establishing a board structure, budgeting, and connecting with funders.

4. Maintain community engagement and energy.

You've engaged the community in creating a vision and action steps. Now they'll be interested in helping make the vision a reality.

- Certain pieces of the revitalization master plan will lend themselves easily to community participation. Tree-planting campaigns, park clean-up days, and volunteer mural paintings are all great examples of ways to involve the community and build enthusiasm for the project.
- You could engage local schools about the possibility of integrating the theme of revitalization into their curriculum. Students could be asked to help design different aspects of the local streetscape, or submit essays describing the future downtown.
- Develop an overall marketing plan for the project that capitalizes on local assets. Some towns have found it useful to choose a particular image (a mountain, tree, river, moose) and create a "brand" for the redevelopment. Stickers, tote-bags, and other free merchandise can help raise awareness.

Keep the community engaged in the process and aware of your progress through social media. You might create a website or Facebook page for your revitalization effort, and post regular updates on the municipal website and community listservs. (See “Communicating with the Community” p.7 for more ideas.)

Downtown revitalization is likely to be a long process. Consider hosting ongoing mini-events to celebrate milestones and community achievements. For more on ideas see “Develop Events that Strengthen Community” p.87.

Some Ideas for Downtown/Village Revitalization:

Approach local business owners about the possibility of extending business hours on Friday nights, or establishing a promotional weekend where shoppers get a discount for shopping downtown.

Consider gateways, artistic signage, and other streetscape enhancements to draw attention to local assets and strengthen a sense of place. These elements can also increase the navigability of your downtown for visitors and help strengthen the feeling of “having arrived somewhere.”

Explore ideas with local artists for creating public installations and developing an arts space downtown. Banners, creative lighting, public sculpture, and murals are all opportunities to highlight local assets and enrich the pedestrian experience.

Consider accessibility concerns. Do all curbs have graduated access? Are intersections safe to the visually impaired? Are there enough benches, support railings and public resting areas along pedestrian thoroughfares to cater to an older population?

Take downtown vegetation to the next level. Consider additional tree and shrub plantings and sidewalk potted plants. Talk to local businesses about installing hanging flowerpots along their frontage.

Create a central, age-friendly recreational hub by installing outdoor chess or ping pong tables.

Resources

People Who Can Help

The Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD)’s State Designation Programs would be a great place to start to discuss ways to move forward with your efforts. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/designation-programs, or contact:

- Gary Holloway—Downtown Designation, at gary.holloway@vermont.gov or 522-2444.
- Richard Amore—Village Center revitalization at richard.amore@vermont.gov or 585-0061.

Preservation Trust of Vermont can offer support for historic buildings and historic preservation efforts. Contact Lisa Ryan at lisa@ptvermont.org or 917-2994. Visit ptvermont.org.

Your **Local Regional Planning Commission** can be a key partner in helping to develop a plan and map out the future of the downtown/village center. Find the RPC for your area here: <https://www.vapda.org/>.

The Urban Community Forestry Program could help to gain access to technical assistance for street trees. Contact Elise Schadler at elise.schadler@vermont.gov or 522-6015. Visit vtcommunityforestry.org.

Local Motion is a statewide organization with an interest in making village centers more bike and pedestrian friendly, and by extension promoting stronger downtown cores. Contact Karen Yacos at karen@localmotion.org, or 861-2700. Visit localmotion.org.

AARP has a “complete streets” program and guide that helps communities make neighborhoods and village centers more accessible and pedestrian friendly. Contact Kelly Stoddard Poor at kstoddardpoor@aarp.org, or 951-1313. Visit aarp.org/livable-communities/act/walkable-livable-communities/info-12-2012/complete-streets-a-guide-for-vermont-communities.html.

State of Vermont Tourism and Marketing could be a partner in discussing ways to market your town as a destination. Contact Commissioner Heather Pelham at heather.pelham@vermont.gov, or 477-2727. Visit accd.vermont.gov/tourism.

The Citizens’ Institute for Rural Design offers annual technical assistance grants for a three-day designworkshop meant to involve/engage the whole community: rural-design.org.

The National Complete Streets Coalition could be a good resource for materials and support. Learn

more at smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets. There is also a Complete Streets Guide for Vermont that can be accessed through healthvermont.gov.

The Walk Your City templates could be a useful tool to put up signs with walking times to key destinations. walkyourcity.org.

Funding

The Better Connections grant program is a partnership between the Vermont Agencies of Transportation and Commerce and Community Development. This is a program designed to help communities develop a plan for the future of their downtown and village centers. Contact Jacki Cassino. At jackie.cassino@vermont.gov, or 272-2368. Visit vtrans.vermont.gov/planning/projects-programs/better-connections.

Other VTrans Funding Sources:

- **Transportation Alternative Program** - Contact Scott Robertson at scott.robertson@vermont.gov, or 828-5799. Visit vtrans.vermont.gov/highway/local-projects/transport-alt.
- **Bicycle and Pedestrian Program** - Contact Jon Kaplan at jon.kaplan@vermont.gov, or 828-0059. Visit vtrans.vermont.gov/highway/local-projects/bike-ped.

The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has several grant or tax credit programs that can support this work. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development, or contact:

- For Downtown and Village Tax Credits, Gray Holloway at gary.holloway@vermont.gov, or 522-2444.
- For State Historic Preservation Grants to support repair and restoration of historic buildings, contact Caitlin Corkins at caitlin.corkins@vermont.gov, or 828-3047.
- Municipal Planning Grants are available to help support town capital improvement plans and other future planning goals. Contact Jenni Lavoie at jenni.lavoie@vermont.gov, or 828-5229.
- The **Vermont Community Development Program** offers grants to support planning, infrastructure, housing and economic development. Community Development Block Grants are federal Planning Grants available through the VCDP. Contact Cindy Blondin at cindy.blondin@vermont.gov, or 828-5219.

The Northern Border Regional Commission offers grants to support marketing, economic development, workforce development, infrastructure, etc. Visit nbrc.gov/content/vermont.

USDA Rural Development offers federal support for towns and villages through a variety of loan and grant programs aimed at enhancing rural quality of life through investing in housing, essential community facilities, municipal infrastructure, and economic development. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt for grant information, and find contacts here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices/vt> or 802-828-6000.

The Vermont Arts Council offers grant programs that support work at the intersection of art and community revitalization. To learn more contact Michele Bailey at mbailey@vermontartscouncil.org, or 828-3294. Visit vermontartscouncil.org.

Vermont Housing Conservation Board has funding to help local groups hire grant writers to fund community and economic development projects. Contact Liz Gleason at liz@vhcb.org, or 828-3370. Visit vhcb.org/redi.

Guides and Other Resources

Bethel Better Block Project is a good example of Village revitalization. See more here bethelrevitalizationinitiative.org/better-block.

Community Workshop LLC and **AARP** teamed up to create a DIY Community Cookbook – a free, hands-on guide to do-it-yourself projects that can lead to big improvements for towns and neighborhoods. Find it here: communityworkshopllc.com/diy-community-cookbook#:~:text=Community%20Workshop%20and%20AARP%20Vermont,place%2C%20and%20let's%20get%20cooking

Build a School and Community Partnership

When parents and local residents feel invested in the schools, and schools are strongly connected to the community, kids learn better. Meanwhile, community members benefit from all of the social and economic advantages that arise from a thriving, successful school and community center.

Action Steps

1. Build the partnership.

Build a list of potentially interested participants, thinking as inclusively as possible about who would care about strengthening a school-community relationship. Think about students, parents, teachers, local business leaders, organization heads, community groups, civic and social clubs. If you broaden the invitation to any community member who cares, you might be pleasantly surprised by the energy and volunteerism that emerges from the community (see "Inviting the Public" p.4).

Convene a meeting to frame the purpose and direction for the partnership.

Together, build a clearly articulated set of goals. What do you hope to accomplish? What might you achieve, both in the short term and longer term, by coming together? Identify outcomes that all partners can agree to. (See "Setting Priorities for Action" p.13).

Formalize a structure to stay connected. You may wish to create a board with representatives from each institution, plus ad hoc members to represent unaffiliated sectors such as parents or taxpayers.

Develop a communications plan. How are you going to communicate internally among partners? How are you going to continue to communicate with the larger community and solicit participation in your efforts?

2. Inventory local educational assets, skills, and needs.

Assets: Build a list of successful educational assets in your community.

- Identify existing educational programs and collaborations. Evaluate their impact on participants, level of outreach to the broader community, and financial sustainability.
- Who benefits from current programs?
- Who supports them?

Skills: Inventory the skills in your community. This inventory can be used for multiple purposes, including the development of a talent pool, and for later matching potential mentees or apprentices to local experts.

- Build a list of businesses and organizations in the community that could offer training or educationally enriching experiences.

- Think creatively. Keep in mind the skills and talents of individuals, including farmers, self-employed people, entrepreneurs, outdoorspeople, hobbyists, and others.
- Identify particular areas of expertise among local teachers or professors that could be valuable to the community.

Needs and Opportunities: Identify areas where coordination is currently lacking or there is an opportunity for more connection. This is the time to think creatively about all the ways the school and community might come together. Consider apprenticeships, mentor programs, community service, sporting events, integrating municipal issues into local curricula, and internships. More ideas are outlined below.

3. Expand school-community programming.

Work with your list of partners and talent inventory to implement your creative program ideas. Following the lead of other Vermont communities, you might create collaborations to:

- Develop a local mentorship or apprenticeship program.
 - Mentorships and apprenticeships connect students to community and business leaders. Students' varied interests can spur new engagement from the community.
 - Not only can mentorships and apprenticeships improve students' educational outcomes, they can improve professional and social outcomes for all parties.
 - The key to successful mentorships is to have well-articulated protocols and safety guidelines. Developing these could be the undertaking of a local committee; or connect with statewide educational providers and professionals for assistance in drafting guideline language.
- Increase incentives for internships and service-learning by developing longer-term opportunities or positions with local businesses and organizations.
 - Allowing high school juniors and seniors to acquire academic credit for part-time work, for example, can offer hands-on learning while developing a pipeline of skilled employees for local employers.
- Host a school-business symposium. This could provide an opportunity for community dialogue. Discussion themes could include:
 - Preparing students for the working world
 - Identifying local workforce needs
 - Making the most of mentorships and apprenticeships
 - Sharing inspiring business and vocation stories
- Convene a series of school-community forums on locally prioritized topics of interest. Topics might include farm-to-school initiatives, healthy communities, substance abuse, diversity and equity issues, homeschool/school partnerships, standardized testing, and civic participation.
- Integrate school events and activities into a broader community calendar, in order to help to increase community participation.
- Make school playgrounds and recreational facilities available to the broader community during non-school hours. This can go a long way towards fostering community good will. Consider coordinating an open gym, ice rink, playground, or ball field hours.

Connect with a nearby college if possible. Nearly every idea described above for a school partnership could be done with a college or university. If your town does have a local college, there are even more opportunities for mentorship and tutoring of local high school students by college students.

Consider seeking outside funding sources and philanthropy, particularly to help support pilot initiatives. For more information on potential state and local funding sources, see “Resources” section below.

4. Communicate, celebrate, and reflect.

Continually keep the community informed about all this good work. Use a variety of communications channels from traditional media to local community listservs, the town and school webpages, and social media. (See “Communicating with the Community” p.7).

Tell positive stories of successful partnerships. Promoting community service projects and opportunities will not only encourage student participation and increase community volunteers, but also remind people of the value of community collaboration, support, and service and build local morale. Many residents may simply not know the breadth of the opportunities available, and heightened awareness may directly lead to increased program participation.

Your efforts are part of a continuing community story, so be sure to mention past work that you have built on. This will help strengthen community understanding and sense of ownership.

Take time periodically to reflect on the programs and the narrative you’re building. What’s working? What’s not? Have the needs of the community changed? Use the team you have built to evaluate and improve on your efforts.

Resources

People Who Can Help

The Vermont Agency of Education can be a resource. The Secretary could be invited to come to town and be a part of fostering this partnership and improving opportunity for students. Visit education.vermont.gov, or contact:

- Dan French, Secretary of Education, at daniel.french@vermont.gov, or 479-1030.
- Heather Bouchey, Deputy Secretary, at heather.bouchey@vermont.gov, or 479-1030

Mobius is Vermont’s state-wide mentoring organization. This group is a valuable resource and they may also have funding to support mentoring activities. Contact Chad Butt, Executive Director, at chad@mobiusmentors.org, or 658-1888. Visit mobiusmentors.org.

UP for Learning is a useful resource to help bring young people and adults together as partners to design and implement initiatives. Contact Lindsey Halman, Executive Director, at info@upforlearning.com, or 552-8140. Visit upforlearning.com.

Vermont Afterschool, Inc. can help with afterschool programming and other youth enrichment programs. Contact Holly Morehouse, Executive Director, at hollymorehouse@vermontafterschool.org, or 448-3464. Visit vermontafterschool.org.

Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) could be a helpful partner in finding funding for conservation project jobs in the community, and could be a resource in thinking about ways to engage youth in the community. Contact Breck Knauft, Executive Director, at breck.knauft@vycc.org, or 598-6386. Visit vycc.org.

UVM Extension provides programming to help connect youth to their communities and communities to youth. Contact Lauren Traister, Teen and Leadership Coordinator, at lauren.traister@uvm.edu.

Funding

Vermont Community Foundation can be a funding partner to help connect the community and address the opportunity gap in Vermont. Visit www.vermontcf.org, or contact:

- Sarah Waring at swaring@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x283.
- Kevin Wiberg – Spark Community Grants. kwiberg@vermontcf.org, or 388-3355 x284.

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. You can search the **Vermont Foundations Directory** using keywords like “education” “youth” or other words that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area. Find the database here: <https://fdovermont.foundationcenter.org/>.

Address Substance Use in Your Community

Most Vermont communities are grappling with the challenge of substance use disorders. While Vermont has systems and services in place to support prevention, treatment, and recovery, community-based initiatives can help. Your efforts can connect people to key resources, create critical prevention strategies, and improve outcomes. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy, but Vermonters have found that the most effective prevention efforts include coordination across multiple environments, sectors, and providers. Here are some strategies.

Action steps

1. Build a coalition.

Gather a group of individuals in your community interested in addressing substance use and promoting prevention and recovery locally. Invite a cross-section of the community including health care providers and municipal leaders, as well as representatives from local schools, health and service organizations, faith groups, vocational associations, businesses, and any other concerned parties.

If possible, consult with recovery providers to identify individuals in recovery who may be willing to serve on the team and consult around strategy and needs.

As a coalition, build a vision and set of core values. What are you working toward? What changes you would most like to see? Will this group focus on prevention, treatment and recovery, or both? For process ideas, see “Developing A Community Vision” p.10.

2. Understand the challenge.

As a team, consult with experts and service providers to further your group’s understanding of community-based prevention and evidence-based prevention practices. How can a community-based team, outside of the health care community, most effectively support recovery and community health?

As part of your research, consult with area resource providers, medical experts, law enforcement, and other partners. Vermont has 12 recovery centers around the state; consider connecting with the one nearest you for information and support.

Gather data about the extent of substance abuse in your community.

Map your community’s recovery and prevention assets—who is working on this issue already?

Gather information on community members' concerns, how they view current challenge, and the resources that they want or need. Use a variety of tools in order to reach the most people, such as:

- surveys (online and paper)
- tabling at events with an interactive display or activity
- hosting a gathering with a topical speaker and time for people to share stories in small groups
- municipal webpage
- social media
- traditional media (newspaper, radio, etc.).

3. Develop strategies to address the challenge.

Based on community input, your research and consultations, and your goals, build a list of potential community-based strategies that could support prevention and recovery.

Many Vermont communities have developed projects to support prevention and recovery. There are multiple evidence-based strategies to advance this work. Here are some that communities have found successful:

• Prevention and Community Building

- Disseminate useful information and offer prevention education. Use social media, press, community forums, health fairs, and other venues to share information about health, wellness, and prevention.
- Create and promote positive alternatives:
 - * Identify family-friendly activities and promote them monthly. Opportunities could include cooking classes, arts and crafts, outdoor movies, sports, concert series, and outdoor recreation
 - * Create and support afterschool and summer activities for local youth
 - * Throw neighborhood or village block parties to celebrate community assets and connect neighbors
- Launch neighborhood, downtown, or village beautification and art projects, or other “place-making” efforts to build pride of place and community connection.

• Treatment and Recovery

- Market and expand a “Drug Takeback” program in your community. Work with your local pharmacy and law enforcement to discover new opportunities throughout the year.
- Consult with experts to explore how to reduce access to substances. Techniques that have worked in some communities include tighter zoning on alcohol outlets, and stronger enforcement around underage drinking or other drug sale and use.
- Help people know where to get help. Develop and share a comprehensive list of local recovery and prevention resources.
- Develop programming specifically for community members in recovery such as exercise classes, art or craft classes, and support groups. Connect to expert guidance and support, or other ways to help participants connect, share stories, and offer mutual support.

- Organize educational forums, bringing in expert guidance, for prescribers and dispensers of medications to build strategies and structure to work together in collaboration.
- Develop networking and connection among area care providers to promote resource sharing, coordination, and improved communication.

4. Choose action priorities.

Gather your coalition to review the list of strategies and determine priorities for action. Which ideas will be actionable today? What will have the greatest impact in your community? See “Setting Priorities for Action” p.13.

At this stage, it may be helpful to make another specific push to solicit ideas from the community. Consider hosting an event or conducting a poll to determine community members’ priorities and their interest in the programming your team has identified.

Select priorities and develop a plan to put them into place.

If funding is required, develop a budget and build a fundraising plan. See “Budgeting and Fundraising” p.31.

5. Continually engage the community.

At each step of your efforts, consult with the community and inform them of your efforts. Community invitation and connection, pride, and a sense of ownership are key to the success of community-based prevention strategies.

- Host forums and events so people can learn more.
- As your work moves forward, share stories and accomplishments.
- Create opportunities for individuals to take meaningful volunteer action in addressing substance use issues.
- For more outreach ideas, see “Communicating with the Community” p.7.

Resources

People Who Can Help

The **Vermont Department of Health Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs** oversees a network of health promotion, prevention, intervention, treatment and recovery services. They can help develop local strategies and point to local, regional, and statewide resources. Visit healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drugs.

To learn more about Community Prevention and how it works, the **Department of Health** has compiled an excellent resource here: healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drug-abuse/programs-services/how-prevention-works.

The Vermont Association for Mental Health and Addiction Recovery/Recovery Vermont is a statewide organization dedicated to supporting recovery and mental health. Recovery Vermont is also responsible for the training of recovery coaches throughout the state, a very strong network. Contact info@recoveryvermont.org, or visit recoveryvermont.org.

The **Vermont Recovery Network** supports access to recovery services. The twelve recovery centers in the state are invaluable community resources. Find the one nearest you and connect with their leadership. Find a list of these centers on the Vermont Recovery Network website here: vtrecoverynetwork.org/centers.

Rise VT can help support local efforts to promote community health and wellness. Find the Rise VT contact in your region here risevt.org.

Vermont Afterschool would be an excellent partner if you are working to develop out of school time programming for youth. Contact Holly Morehouse at hollymorehouse@vermontafterschool.org, or visit vermontafterschool.org.

The **Vermont Agency of Education** could be a partner in programming to support substance abuse prevention in youth. Visit education.vermont.gov/student-support/healthy-and-safe-schools/substance-abuse-prevention.

Funding

The **Vermont Community Foundation** provides funding for programs that spark community connection and help to close the opportunity gap in communities. To find out more about their grant programs Contact Kevin Wiberg at kwiberg@vermontcf.org, or visit vermontcf.org.

Rise VT provides small amplify grants for community projects that focus on improving health and wellness. Contact your regional Rise VT coordinator to learn more. Find them at risevt.org.

The **Department of Health** provides several grants to support community prevention. healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drug-abuse/programs-services/prevention-programs

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. You can search the **Vermont Foundations Directory** using keywords like “prevention” “substance use” “recovery” “youth” or others that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area. Find the database here: fdovermont.foundationcenter.org/

Guides and other resources

The Vermont Substance Abuse Treatment & Recovery Directory: healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/ADAP_Treatment_Directory.pdf

Project Vision is a model in Rutland City of a collaboration of resources and services to address various community challenges, including abuse and addiction. Visit projectvisionrutland.com.

The Deerfield Valley Community Partnership is an excellent model of a community-based prevention strategy. Visit healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/ADAP_Deerfield_Valley_Community_Partnership.pdf.

Advance Village Wastewater Infrastructure Projects

One of the key elements of village or downtown development is often water or sewer infrastructure. As communities across the state are making plans for next stage economic development, they are faced with the challenge of developing the infrastructure needed to support future growth and business development and sustain a healthy and clean environment. While launching a large infrastructure project may seem like a daunting prospect, many Vermont communities are hard at work towards accomplishing their goals, and help is available. Here are some of the steps involved.

Action Steps

1. Build Community Partnership

Meet with local government leadership to ensure that the planning commission, Select Board, city council, and/or village trustees are interested in a water or sewer project.

Meet with non-governmental community members to assess their interest in the project. Keep the whole community informed, and be particularly sure to reach out to those who will be directly affected by the project (e.g. village businesses and residents). See “Communicating with the Community” p.7.

Do some team learning and consulting with experts to understand the various options available and the steps a community needs to take to pursue water, wastewater, and stormwater improvements. This is complex and technical work, so it can help to develop a general understanding as a team of the work ahead and the possibilities available to the community. See the guides and other resources linked in the Resources section below for more details and background on these projects.

2. Gather Data on Needs and Project Feasibility

Conduct a survey of the community to determine public opinion on the existing systems, current needs, and appetite for infrastructure development. (See below for state help designing a survey.)

Conduct technical and financial feasibility studies. Identify state and federal funding options to hire an engineering consultant to conduct the study (see resources below).

Create a Request for Proposals (RFP) to identify an engineering consultant.

3. Determine Project Design

Based on the engineering study and community input, work with a consultant and technical assistance providers to design a system that meets community needs. In this step, the community will move from a feasibility study towards a preliminary engineering report – this process will provide a more detailed look at the scope and cost of the project. Develop a projected cost estimate, and a plan to finance the project.

4. Keep the Public Informed and Engaged

Keep the community informed and engaged in your efforts throughout the project. Offer multiple opportunities for the community to learn more and express opinions, and incorporate their suggestions as you progress. (See “Communicating with the Community” p.7).

Create informational materials that describe the project design. Give an honest, balanced assessment of both the costs and benefits for the community. Include the projected development impacts the project will have on the community, economic benefits, and the impacts and benefits to non-users/taxpayers.

Build public understanding of the project. Outreach and communication elements could include public meetings, printed and online informational materials, tabling at events, educational workshops, a non-binding resolution at Town Meeting Day, or other strategies to build public understanding and engagement. See the “Tools” section of this guide for a variety of resources on inclusive participation and facilitating effective meetings.

5. Implement and Construct

Once the feasibility study and project design are completed, identify funding sources and contractors for project implementation.

Work with community leadership, engineering experts, and technical assistance providers to implement project plan.

This is a multi-stage effort, and you will want a skilled team to ensure the best outcomes for your community. See below for technical assistance and resources.

Resources

People Who Can Help

Your local **Regional Development Corporation (RDC)** and/or **Regional Planning Commission (RPC)** can offer technical support and help connect you with professionals and experts in your area. Find your RDC here: <https://acd.vermont.gov/economic-development/resources/rdc>, and your RPC here: <https://www.vapda.org/>.

USDA Rural Development can provide technical assistance even if USDA RD funds are not being used for the project. Contact Eric Law at eric.law@usda.gov or 828-6033.

The **Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation Village Wastewater Solutions Initiative** is a key resource to support local work on the development of wastewater systems. They can help with models for survey development and sample RFP templates as well as identifying potential engineering firms. Contact Lynette Whitney Claudon at lynette.claudon@vermont.gov or 490-6226. Visit <https://dec.vermont.gov/village-wastewater>.

The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) can provide technical assistance to communities on water infrastructure planning, Contact: Mark Johnson, Vermont State Lead, at mjohnson@rcapsolutions.org or 505-1037.

The Vermont Rural Water Association can provide free technical assistance to communities on water infrastructure planning. Contact Liz Royer, Executive Director, at lroyer@vtruralwater.org, 802-660-4988. Visit www.vtruralwater.org.

The Vermont League of Cities and Towns provides municipal assistance, support, and advice. They can help to answer legal or operational questions and could connect to other communities with successful initiatives. Contact info@vlct.org or 229-9111. Visit www.vlct.org.

Funding

USDA Rural Development has grant and loan funds that can support the planning and construction of water/wastewater and stormwater infrastructure projects. Contact: Eric Law, Community Programs Specialist, Eric.Law@vt.usda.gov or 828-6033.

VT Department of Environmental Conservation can provide engineering planning advances as well as construction loan and grant funding options. Money is provided for planning and is not repaid unless action is taken on project development. Additionally, Vermont's State Clean Water Revolving Fund offers 50% planning and design grants. Contact Lynette Claudon at lynette.claudon@vermont.gov or 490-6226. Visit <https://dec.vermont.gov/facilities-engineering/water-financing/cwsrf>

If your project includes aspects of stormwater management, it could draw additional funds from the **VT Department of Environmental Conservation Water Investment Division** including the Ecosystem Restoration Program and the Clean Water Fund. Contact Lynette Claudon at lynette.claudon@vermont.gov or 490-6226. Visit <https://dec.vermont.gov/about-dec/divisions/water-investment>.

Municipal Planning Grants at the Agency of Commerce and Community Development could support feasibility and engineering studies. Contact Jenni Lavoie at jenni.lavoie@vermont.gov or 828-1948 <https://accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/municipal-planning-grant>.

Vermont Community Development Block Grants are a potential funding source. Contact Cindy Blondin at cindy.blondin@vermont.gov or 828-5219. Visit <https://accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp>.

The federal **Economic Development Authority** could provide planning/implementation grants. When plans are advanced, contact Matthew Suchodolski at the EDA office for our region at Matthew.J.Suchodolski@eda.gov and 215-597-1242.

Vermont Housing Conservation Board has funding to help local groups hire grant writers to fund community and economic development projects. Contact Liz Gleason at liz@vhcb.org or 828-3370. Visit <https://www.vhcb.org/redi>.

Northern Border Regional Commission could provide planning and implementation grants. Visit www.nbrc.org.

Vermont Towns that Accomplished Projects or are Moving Forward on Water and Wastewater Solutions:

- Burke
- Montgomery
- Westford
- Greensboro
- Winooski

Guides and other Resources:

The overall steps and guidance in this document is in part modeled after a detailed guide from RCAP Solutions on “Getting Your Project to Flow Smoothly;” you can find a detailed guide on the Agency of Natural Resources website here: <https://anrweb.vt.gov/DEC/IronPIG/DownloadFile.aspx?DID=127089&DVID=0>

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs has a guide titled “Wastewater Solutions for Vermont Communities” which provides more detailed guidance around many of the steps listed above. Find that document here: <https://accd.vermont.gov/sites/accdnew/files/documents/CD/CPR/DHCD-Planning-WW-Treatment-Options-Guidance.pdf>

Create a Community WiFi Hotspot

Vermont communities have discovered that creating a central location where anyone can access free, wireless internet has many advantages. It offers a fast connection for residents who either can't access or afford internet at home. It's a boon for economic development, since local businesses can be promoted on the landing page. Free WiFi is also attractive to tourists, and sends the signal that the community is forward thinking and open for business.

Action steps

1. Build a team and gather community ideas.

Gather a group of people interested in creating community WiFi. Cast the net widely, including local businesses owners and people who work from home, municipal officials, educators and students, retirees, downtown revitalization groups, and others. (See "Inviting the Public" p.4.) Together, using surveys, public meetings, or other techniques, your team can explore ideas.

- What gaps exist in current downtown/village coverage?
- What locations or businesses experience a high degree of traffic and would be likely usage hubs?
- How would the rollout of downtown/village WiFi affect businesses that currently draw customers by providing that service?

2. Develop a plan.

A community WiFi hotspot will need installation, funding, and ongoing maintenance.

Identify a person or committee to serve as an ambassador for the project. Tasks might include:

- Strategizing with local partners about the exact placement of the WiFi zone
- Gaining permission from local property owners for the installation of broadcasting equipment
- Serving as a liaison between business owners and technicians
- Finding and working with a contractor to manage the installation of broadcasting equipment

Connect with local leadership and state agencies to identify possible funding sources to cover start-up costs and ongoing systems maintenance.

Identify someone to serve as a moderator, who will be responsible for overseeing the network's operation and maintenance, and address technical questions from the public. This person could eventually provide support remotely via a cloud-controller.

3. Obtain the right hardware and software.

Finding the right hardware is a critical step to ensuring the long-term viability of the project. A public WiFi system usually includes two components: a gateway, which connects to a wired internet connection like an ethernet port and broadcasts an initial signal; and repeaters, which receive the signal from a gateway device and rebroadcast it to extend the network. Work with an experienced contractor to help identify a system that fits local needs, scale and specifications.

Here is a list of common brands:

- Cisco (the Aironet 1570)
- Aerohive (the AP170)
- Aruba (the MSr2000 and the MSR4000)
- Ruckus (the T300 series)
- Meraki (the MR62) Note that Meraki is now owned by Cisco).

Most of these devices function as both gateways and repeaters. Check with an experienced contractor before for investing in a system.

The proper software allows the moderator to monitor the hotspot and ensure everything is working correctly. Typically, this is done through the cloud, which means maintenance can be performed remotely from any browser. Each hardware system may have its own proprietary software or compatibility specifications. This is another reason why it can be helpful to work with an experienced contractor in setting up the network.

4. Bring the system online, and let the community know.

Choose an appropriate name for the network that will be obvious to residents and visitors.

Consider engaging an experience cyber-security firm to help minimize the threat of cyber-attacks.

Once the system is operational (and tested and debugged), spread the word throughout the community. (For ideas, see “Communicating with the Community” p.7). Post information on how to access the network:

- on public bulletin boards around town
- through the town website and social media page
- in the windows of consenting local businesses
- in local newspapers
- on flyers at B&Bs and local attractions
- on the community listserv

Resources

People Who Can Help

Vermont Department of Public Service (PSD) is the key contact at the State and can help the community explore available options. Contact, Rob Fish, Rural Broadband Technical Assistance Specialist at Robert.fish@vermont.gov, or 522-2617. Visit publicservice.vermont.gov.

Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) oversaw e-Vermont and Vermont’s Digital Economy Project and can help connect with the right resources and expertise. Contact Margaret Gibson McCoy at info@vtrural.org, or 223-6091. Visit vtrural.org.

Funding

USDA Rural Development has grant/loan programs might provide useful (in particular the Rural Business Development Grant). Visit rd.usda.gov/vt, or contact Susan Poland, Business Programs Specialist at susan.poland@vt.usda.gov.

The Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) has funds available for telecommunications and economic development projects. Contact Tim Tierney at tim.tierney@vermont.gov, or 505-5496. Visit nbrc.gov.

Guides and Other Resources

VCRD’s e-Vermont “Planning and Implementing a Wi-Fi zone for your Town” is a more detailed, comprehensive version of the action steps above. See the full guide here: www.vtrural.org/programs/digital-economy/services/WiFi/toolkit.

Additional Resources & Acknowledgements

Being an effective leader is an ongoing process, one punctuated by continual introspection, re-evaluation, and personal development. Here in Vermont, we are fortunate to have not only a deep roster of dedicated citizens ready to step forward into leadership roles, but also an extensive network of professionals committed to supporting and developing new and existing leaders. Below is a list of organizations that offer varying degrees of support for Vermonters looking to get things done. It is by no means exhaustive, but is meant instead as a starting point to connect local movers and shakers to the supports they need to take their work to the next level.

Vermont Leadership Programs

Snelling Center for Government: Vermont Leadership Institute

The Snelling Center for Government's Vermont Leadership Institute ("VLI") gives participants the information, tools and inspiration to make greater contributions to their organizations, to their communities and to Vermont. For more information, visit snellingcenter.org.

Common Good Vermont

Common Good Vermont is an organization dedicated to supporting the non-profit sector across Vermont. They offer a number of resources and educational programs on topics including nonprofit management, fundraising, and more. For more information, visit commongoodvt.org.

Preservation Trust of Vermont: Preservation Retreats

Preservation Trust of Vermont is an organization committed to preserving and revitalizing Vermont's historic buildings. They offer a range of supportive services for anyone working in this arena, including topic-based retreats at the Grand Isle Lakehouse for 20-25 participants to come together, network, and connect with state leaders and resources to help forward local projects. For more information, visit ptvermont.org/our-work/retreats.

Agency of Natural Resource: Municipal Day

Offered annually every fall, Municipal Day is a day-long conference hosted by ANR that offers training and ongoing support for local municipal officials. For more information, visit anr.vermont.gov/about_us/special-topics/municipal-day.

Vermont League of Cities and Towns

VLCT is an organization committed to supporting municipalities in Vermont in a number of arenas. They offer training for municipal officials, workshops and ongoing support for municipalities through their Municipal Assistance Center (MAC). For more information, visit vlct.org/mac.

Marlboro Center for New Leadership

The Marlboro Center for New Leadership was discontinued in 2020 following the pending merger between its parent institution Marlboro College and Emerson College in Boston. Many of the courses offered as part of their program, however, continue to be available through Common Good Vermont, and they have published a public [list](#) of leadership development professionals and trainers, which is available at marlboro.edu.

Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce: Leadership Champlain

The Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce offers a year-long series of full-day seminars and overnight retreats geared at sparking and supporting emerging and current leadership in the Champlain Valley region. For more information visit vermont.org/chamber or click [here](#) for the Leadership Champlain homepage.

Leadership Southeast Vermont

Leadership Southeast Vermont is an intensive, immersive year-long multi-session leadership program much like Leadership Champlain or the Vermont Leadership Institute, but with a focus on the Southeastern region of the state. For more information, visit leadershipsevt.org

Vital Communities: Leadership Upper Valley

Vital Communities is a non-profit based in White River Junction. They offer a similar year-long cohort-based leadership program for local change-makers. For more information, visit vitalcommunities.org/leadershipuppervalley.

Northeast Kingdom Collaborative, Northeast Stewardship Center: NEK Leadership Institute

The NEK Collaborative is an organization committed to supporting a thriving and resilient Northeast Kingdom, including the three counties of Orleans, Essex, and Caledonia. Together with the Northeast Stewardship Center, they established the NEK Leadership Institute to support and foster leadership across the region. The program adheres to a similar model as other regional leadership programs, with 5 intensive day-long sessions. For more information visit www.northwoodscenter.org/wordpress/outdoor-education/nek-leadership-institute.

Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity

Vermont Partnership for Fairness & Diversity is a relationship-oriented training/consulting service with the social mission of making Vermont a desirable destination for all, particularly outdoor enthusiasts, tourists, conventioners, college students, entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists of color. They offer training and consulting as well

as an annual conference to discuss issues of fairness and diversity and drive forward a vision of Vermont’s multicultural future. For more information, visit vermontpartnership.org/what-we-do.

Vermont Council on Rural Development – Climate Catalysts Leadership Program

The Climate Catalysts Leadership Program brings together a cohort of 10 local leaders from Vermont communities for a year-long process focused on building peer connections, strengthening leadership skills and providing project development support for specific local projects spearheaded by each participant in their communities. For more information, visit vtrural.org/climatecatalysts.

Vermont Changemakers Table

The Vermont Changemakers Table is a professional network for mission-driven young Vermonters committed to the future of Vermont and positive change. A collaboration between Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility (VBSR) and the High Meadows Fund, the group meets quarterly for dinner, conversation and inspiration with Vermont thought leaders. vbsr.org/vermont-changemakers-table

Local Government Pamphlet Series

from the Vermont Institute for Government

This series of informational pamphlets offers an introduction to Vermont government on many topics that affect both local leaders and residents on a day-to-day basis. Created and updated by Paul Gillies, municipal attorney and former Vermont Assistant Secretary of State, this series was created for residents, municipal officials, and anyone interested in how Vermont law affects communities. Widely appreciated when the series was originally created in the 1990s, these pamphlets were brought up to date in spring, 2020.

Pamphlets are available to download and distribute free of charge:

vtinstituteforgovt.weebly.com/resources.html. *If quoting material, please attribute to Vermont Institute for Government.*

The Vermont Institute for Government (VIG)

The VIG is a non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the government remains responsive, accessible, and competent, by improving educational opportunities for local officials and the public regarding how government works. Since 1989, VIG has been creating educational materials, offering workshops, and collaborating on a variety of trainings and educational events for Vermont’s town officers and citizens. For more information and resources, visit vtinstituteforgovt.org.

Programs Designed for Youth

The Governor's Institutes of Vermont

The Governor's Institutes of Vermont are a series of accelerated, residential summer programs for high schoolers and young artists in Vermont to come together on college campuses across the state and dive deeply into a topic area of their choosing. For more information, visit giv.org

Up for Learning

Up for Learning offers a number of program and initiatives designed to shift the youth-adult relationship at the heart of education to partnership, and to increase youth agency. Learn more at upforlearning.org/initiatives.

University of Vermont Extension – 4-H Youth Leadership Programming

The University of Vermont Extension 4-H Program offers a number of Teen and Leadership programs to enable teens to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and aspirations needed for success in the 21st century. To find out more about their programs, visit uvm.edu/extension/youth/teen-leadership-program-offerings.

Acknowledgements

This guide has been inspired by local leaders who step up for their communities and have been the essential ingredient in building the strength and vitality of this state that we love.

No one person or organization can write a comprehensive guide to local community projects without help. Much of the following material has been drawn from over 20 years of VCRD's work in local Vermont communities, and follows from the amazing work of thousands of dedicated local residents and hundreds of project chair-people—we have learned from all of you. This guide is also a compendium of twenty years of guidance and support by VCRD Board Members and Community Visit Facilitators, Scribes and Team Members who have contributed advice, ideas, investments and encouragement to towns throughout the state. We deeply appreciate all the ideas and resources that they have given, and even more, the technical assistance, advice, dollars and encouragement that they have brought to rural Vermont communities in the last generation to support local leaders, local projects and community progress. Vermont would not be the same without your work.

We are deeply grateful to key Vermont leaders who have helped us draft, compile, vet, and ground different sections of the guide:

Susan Clark, of Slow Democracy has been invaluable in working with VCRD staff to draft and polish the guide. Her good sense and bright eye to language are key ingredients in this document, and her passion and deep understanding of local democracy shine throughout.

Aly Richards, Trey Martin, Ansley Bloomer, and the team at **Let's Grow Kids**, for their contributions in helping to think about ways to support access to affordable child care.

Xusana Davis, Vermont's Executive Directory of Racial Equity, and **Curtiss Reed**, Executive Director of the Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity, for helping to refine and enrich our thinking about acknowledging and encouraging diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Peter Mallary, Vice President of the Vermont Association for Mental Health and Recovery, for his insights into helping address substance abuse in local communities.

Monique Priestly, for ground-truthing the realities of opening a coworking space in Vermont.

Eric Law of USDA Rural Development for help to build out details on addressing water and sewer infrastructure in Vermont communities.

Thank you also to the generous funders who provided foundational support to complete and disseminate this guide including:

- **The Agency of Commerce and Community Development**
- **The Bay and Paul Foundations**
- **The High Meadows Fund**
- **The Johnson Family Fund**

- **The Heron Foundation**
- **The National Life Foundation**
- **Northfield Savings Bank**
- **Sustainable Future Fund of the Vermont Community Foundation**
- **The Vermont Community Foundation**
- **The Windham Foundation**
- **VCRD Members and Donors**

Production and printing of this report have been accomplished with generous contributions from the **Windham Foundation** and **Northfield Savings Bank**.

In approaching the work to encourage local leadership in Vermont, VCRD engaged state and local leaders to help frame two highly successful Vermont Community Leadership Summits (<https://www.vtrural.org/Summit18> and <https://www.vtrural.org/Summit19>). The ideas of summit participants helped VCRD set direction to more systematically support local leaders with this guide, in Covid response efforts, and in defining the ideas behind the development of the Vermont Community Leadership Network (vtrural.org/leadership). We are grateful to all participants and partners who have lent ideas, educated us on issues, and advanced these efforts.

While this work depended heavily on input from the above partners and community members, the VCRD staff worked collaboratively to compile, draft, edit, and format each chapter to ensure that the information is current, clear, and connected to the work we have seen on the ground over the past 20 years of community organizing and facilitation:

- **Jon Copans**, *Climate Economy Model Communities Program Director*
- **Paul Costello**, *Executive Director*
- **Jenna Koloski**, *Community and Policy Manager*
- **Nick Kramer**, *Community and Policy Associate*
- **Margaret McCoy**, *Operations and Communications Manager*

Thank you as well to **Gemma Del Rossi**, former VCRD staff member who kicked off the work on this guide by compiling over 20 years of community input, action plans, and resources.

Lastly, and importantly, we deeply appreciate the thousands of Vermonters who, through their input in our Community Visit processes and Summits over the last several decades and their dedicated leadership in communities around the state, have inspired the bulk of this work. Without your commitment to democracy and your hard work to boost your local community, Vermont would not be the place it is today. Thank you for all your leadership!



Join the Vermont Community Leadership Network

vtrural.org/leadership

Vermont is a place where motivated individuals have real power to make positive changes in their communities. Throughout our history, the work of these leaders has shaped our towns and the state as a whole.

Building on the Vermont Council on Rural Development's (VCRD) two decades of deep facilitative work throughout Vermont, the Vermont Community Leadership Network (VCLN) was launched to connect and support local leaders—with or without an official position—as they build local projects, organizations, and systems that serve their communities and Vermont's urgent and long-term needs.

VCRD supports members of the VCLN with online workshops on community development initiatives, skills training, and the sharing of best practices and inspiring success stories. The network also provides opportunities for small groups of leaders to come together around focused areas of action, building a shared sense of common purpose, learning, support, and success.

Learn more and join the Vermont Community Leadership Network at:
vtrural.org/leadership.



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