

Rutland takes a bow

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The state's progressive business leaders held their annual meeting in Burlington last week, and Rutland was one of the stars.

Vermont Business for Social Responsibility is a growing force in the state's business community, building our "green" credentials while at the same time profiting off that image to market their ideas and products.

One of their morning sessions was hosted by Vermont Rural Development's Paul Costello and featured Rutland's Creative Economy leaders along with snippets of Art Jones' documentary, "The Blood in This Town," as a how-to model of getting things done with a grass-roots effort. The presentation was warmly received by a standing-room-only audience of about 75 people: Entrepreneurs and others looking to build the state's economy alongside the strength of its communities.

We cannot expect major manufacturers to reverse decades-long trends and suddenly decide to go on a factory-building spree in Rutland, in Vermont or indeed the Northeast. Global macroeconomic forces favoring overseas sweatshops are too strong.

Growth in this region comes from clusters of opportunity or specialized niches. Bennington, for instance, is working hard to develop a composites industry based on a couple of relatively small manufacturers. They in turn attract and train a workforce knowledgeable about the industry and there is opportunity for more and perhaps larger investment in the future.

But even that success is built on a chain of coincidences, beginning with the war in Iraq showing a need for better-armored Humvees, thus creating demand for some of the products coming out of Bennington. You can't build regional development plans on the basis that you might get that lucky

because while you're waiting for lightning to strike, whole communities can fail.

There are no easy solutions, but the state several years ago began a process of encouraging communities to build their own futures instead of waiting for outside help, through the Council on Rural Development's Creative Economy program. Of the many places Costello has taken that message, it has been most successful in Rutland.

Thursday's program was a reminder of that success. It has also become part of the message going forward, as more and more often Rutland's work is being held up statewide as an example of how to get things done.

When, toward the end of the presentation, Costello pointed at the Creative Economy volunteers in attendance and said "These are Rutland's heroes," the audience nodded along in agreement. They are regular people making an enormous impact for the better.

It's also making a difference right here at home, in a way that might not be as visible as Friday Night Live or even the makeover of Pine Hill from scrubland into a city park. Steve Costello of CVPS — coincidentally, Paul's brother — reports that on Friday they screened "The Blood in This Town" to the junior class at Rutland High School to an equally positive reaction. If we can get the youth of the city excited and involved in our community, proud to be from Rutland, so that they want to stay here and build something, we have a bright future.