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today's **DEALS**

Bennington speaks out at community forums

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Staff Writer

BENNINGTON -- Local officials and residents fanned out in force in nine separate forums Thursday as part of the Vermont Council on Rural Development's community visit program aimed at jump-starting discussion on a variety of topics to boost Bennington.

Executive Director Paul Costello announced in January that the program was coming to Bennington. The program looks to provide local municipal leaders and residents with the state and federal resources required to meet the needs of the community.

A steering committee met last month and identified several forum topics -- poverty, youth, education, downtown, work force, economic development and growth, community and collaboration, arts, recreation and entertainment, and Bennington's self-image. Thursday's meetings were widely attended and helped to identify assets and challenges for each topic.

Downtown issues

The meeting dedicated to Bennington's downtown allowed participants to identify assets and challenges in that district. The 40 or so people at the meeting said downtown has a strong connection to its past, and has the capacity for growth because of available building space.

Some noted that beautification efforts undertaken by the town have made a difference. "I remember when it looked really, really, really bad in the 1980s when a lot of the buildings were rundown," said Sue Congdon, owner of Star Electric.

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Several employers also said they have found it difficult to hire workers who remain dedicated and report to work on time. Others reported a gap in mid-level housing. Low-cost and high-cost housing is available, but mid-level housing is lacking, they said.

Kevin Robinson from the Southwestern Vermont Medical Center said the hospital has been successful in working with local educational institutions to develop training programs to help fill its own work force. But Robinson said some recent potential employees have expressed uncertainty about the local school system

"Those are concerns for us as an institution," Robinson said. "I think the general feeling is that the school system here does not offer the same caliber education."

Education

The education community forum largely praised the local public and private schools, although there was also a focus of thinking "outside the box" from educators and parents who acknowledged what is available now does not work for every

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"I can say we have a beautiful downtown. We look awesome right now, and I think that needs to be the starting point and go from there."

Several challenges were noted, too. Downtown businesses should collaborate on set hours, said Bennington Town Manager Stuart A. Hurd. Others noted that the downtown has no "main attraction" like a theater to consistently draw patrons to the district.

The meeting produced several ideas on how to boost the downtown. Among the ideas suggested were a mayoral government system, historical tours guided by headphone, a downtown arts district, a downtown park, an ice rink, a flea market and a food cooperative.

"It's really interesting to feel the optimism here," Costello said. "I think it's exciting."

Work force

The forum dedicated to Bennington's work force identified several areas of concern. The wages paid for many local jobs do not meet employees' needs for rent.

child.

The idea of breaking away from traditional times that school is in session was repeated -- by educators who said some students do not function well when school begins, and by parents who work evenings and lose the ability to spend time as a family.

Mount Anthony Union High School Principal Sue Maguire, who has helped start a number of alternative programs at the high school, acknowledged that those programs cannot catch every student. To ensure every student is in the best educational structure it would take greater funding to expand and create additional alternative programs.

There was also concern raised about families not instilling the importance of education in their children, as well as other family values, which makes it difficult for those children to be successful in the classroom.

Several educators also pointed to poverty and difficult home situations for some students as a struggle in Bennington. It was said that students come to school hungry and with other things on their mind, which hinders their success.

In addition to more alternative school options, suggestions of greater marketing of the schools and programs, as well as more communication between teachers and parents were suggested. One strategy a parent suggested to increase communication is for each teacher to have their own classroom website parents could check to see what assignments their child should be working on.

Economic development and growth

A session to discuss economic development and growth focused first on assets and challenges in the community, and then expanded on what can be done to improve growth and development in town.

Participants in the discussion cited a diversity of community assets including good town planning, a solid infrastructure, and a number of organizations dedicated to growth.

Peter Odierna, executive director of the Bennington County Industrial Corp., cited three "anchor assets" in Bennington that included healthcare, higher education, and manufacturing. Some time was spent on the topic of drawing college communities off campus, and bringing students -- and faculty -- into Bennington and the downtown.

Another speaker said at least as much focus should be spent drawing new young families into the community.

John Shannahan, executive director of the Better Bennington Corp., explained the current Bennington Economic Development Task Force, which has "invited all partners in town for communication and collaboration," he said, "to make sure they're working together." To improve the situation, participants voiced support for small business. Costello pushed for specifics.

Hurd said development could concentrate on the small businesses that served larger economic "clusters" like higher education or manufacturing. Taking part in the discussion were owners of several recent small business success stories like Crazy Russian Girls and Elusion Camo.

Spotty high speed Internet and cell service were cited as concerns, as was finding start-up capital.

Negative perceptions, "real or not," of the area school system and economy were also said to hamper efforts. Rick Pembroke, chief financial officer of the supervisory union, said that area schools faced "challenging demographics" -- like a 75 percent free and reduced lunch population -- but still produced students who excelled.

Costello asked participants to move from descriptive language to concrete steps forward. Speakers said the community needed to develop a common vision, strengthen existing partnerships, and "develop a positive narrative."

Youth

More available activities and adult involvement were common themes at the community meeting on youth.

The crowd of about 75 people, most of whom were adults, stressed how grown ups need to volunteer their own time and show the youths they value them.

"One of the really important characteristics associated with success for young people is for them to feel they're worth while. Entertainment and all the fun things you can provide in a community will not change the culture and the feeling for the community," Amelia Silver said. "Every young person in this community needs an adult that is paying attention to them, whether it's a teacher, a parent, a coach, a mentor, somebody. And we don't have that right now. And kids need to feel they are doing something that matters in the community."

Teens for Change, a United Counseling Service group for at risk youth that hosts substance-free organized by teens and for teens, was touted by different people as an example of successful programs that can promote change.

Others said there is a need for a community center that brings youth and adults together for free or inexpensive forms of entertainment. People also stressed the importance of teens exploring the outdoors that Vermont is known for through activities like skiing, hiking, hunting, gardening and fishing.

Poverty

More than 100 people attended the discussion of poverty that Steve Dale, executive director of the Vermont School Board Association, facilitated on Thursday afternoon at the Bennington Elks Club.

Present were members of local social service agencies, community activists, educators and school board members, members of the faith and medical communities, elected officials, people in business and economic development, and a handful of people struggling with poverty themselves.

The discussion ranged from the inadequacy of dental and mental health services for those in need to the difficulty of signing up for various services to a desire for the VCRD to have an actual staff presence in Bennington. One person spoke of a "time bank," in which individuals could barter services they have to offer.

At one point a woman in the audience stood up and noted that while people were talking about services, no one was talking about getting people off of welfare and into jobs. "A successful business community could solve a lot of these problems," she said.

For the last 15 minutes, members of the VCRD visit team, composed of Vermonters from outside the area, gave their take on what they had heard. One of these was Doug Racine, secretary of the Vermont Agency of Human Services, who said he was pleased poverty was included as a discussion topic and impressed by how many people had showed up. In addition to the focus on services, he said he liked the emphasis of speakers on the economy. Of people who are getting assistance, "we need to find better ways to connect them to work," he said.

The next meeting in the process will be held in about a month, Dale said. "I have high hopes for this process," he added.

Youth recreation and arts

The meeting on the subjects of arts, recreation and entertainment at the Bennington firehouse drew a crowd of between

60 and 75 people -- a crowd that VCRD moderator said was "one of the largest" arts and rec meetings he had seen any place in the state.

The meeting attendees included a substantial number of youth, as many as 30, and much of the discussion focused on the scattered current recreational opportunities available and the lack of greater opportunities. Some bemoaned the loss of Knapp's Underground on Main Street and others urged the need for athletic facilities such as an indoor basketball court and hockey rink.

While the majority of the local arts and entertainment groups were represented and offered comment -- Oldcastle Theatre, Bennington Museum, the Bennington Arts Center, the Bennington Arts Guild, and others.

And while there was agreement on local opportunities for local artists and entertainers, and the need to "coordinate and collaborate" in certain areas, there was also divergent opinions on the ability to of the local community to support arts and entertainment.

The issue of support and survivability of a divergent local arts and entertainment was addressed, in a somber note, by one of the VCRD visit team who commented at the end of the meeting that there was need to "connect if not consolidate resources" because there may be a "dilution of resources" in Bennington.

Communications and collaboration

The group identified many strengths Bennington has when it comes to communication. WBTV helped immensely during Tropical Storm Irene, said Bennington Select Board Chairman Joseph Krawczyk, while others said local cable channel CAT-TV did well to cover meetings and legislative breakfasts.

The Bennington Banner and Tri-state Pennysaver, print media, were also mentioned as assets. Others said civic organizations all have websites, some of which link to each other, while businesses make use of bulletin boards, and schools can communicate through students and teachers. Nearly all groups have some presence over Facebook.

Kiah Morris, community coordinator for Tobacco-Free Community Partners of Bennington County, said some people have experienced an overload of information and react by tuning it all out.

Broadband and cell phone access have room for improvement. Some said negative news, especially through the Banner, travels faster than good and some criticized the paper for not running press releases.

Others issues raised were the disparity between the lower economic classes and the middle to higher ones. Many felt as though economically challenged people felt like they had less say in what goes on in Bennington.

It was agreed that entities should feel free to talk to each other more. One person suggested a set of three goals be identified and each entity see what in their own mission statements might be turned towards those goals, thus getting them done and building on relationships.

Bennington self-image

Dozens of people discussed a perception of Bennington's poor self-image at an evening forum, and why it seems to persist. "I see Bennington's image of itself as one of our great hurdles," said Greg Van Houten, a local business owner and Select Board member-elect.

"A lot of the darker images of Bennington come from people who grew up and don't have an outside perspective," he said. "I think that in your hometown it's naturally to miss things that are going on."

Local resident Jeanne Conner, a former school board member, said she has long wondered why the town seems to have a negative image of itself. She said part of it is likely attributed to a lasting perception that the school system is subpar.

"There is a perception out there that our school system stinks and it's not true," Conner said, that is carried along by many sources, including local Realtors.

Krawczyk said great educational opportunities are available for those who seek it. "We put (students) in Ivy League schools, the kids that want to go," he said.

Others cited generational poverty and Bennington's closer proximity to New York and Massachusetts rather than Burlington and Montpelier as a reason for an "identity crisis."

Several ideas were offered to help improve the town's self-image, including working at changing the perception of local kids' futures. Several people said the community should embrace technical training schools and give it the same value as college for those that seek such training.

Another person said a mayoral system could provide one "big cheerleader" for the town and help move things along more quickly. The select board form of government tends to move more slowly, the person said.

And, Bennington residents must be more proactive about spreading positive news and events in Bennington locally and around the state and in refining and promoting a clear, positive image of the town around the state and region.

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Costello said the VCRD staff will review notes from all nine forums and cull the information and ideas contributed by attendees into shorter lists. A town meeting-style event will be held in mid-April to allow for residents to choose specific goals related to each meeting topic.

Success will depend on widespread community involvement, Costello said. A similar program was conducted in Pownal several years ago and others have been run in numerous Vermont communities. Town officials in Bennington have embraced the effort and participated in Thursday's meetings.

Staff writers Dawson Raspuzzi, Keith Whitcomb, Zeke Wright, Mark Rondeau and Ken Norris contributed to this story.

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