

After a busy couple of years, what's next for Manchester?

Andrew McKeever - Managing Editor The Manchester Journal

Posted:

ManchesterJournal.com

? Q3?ER - One Roundabout. Check. A Park House. Check. New Visitor's Center. New streetlights, refurbished Adams Park, plus a new parking lot for a historic district. Town wifi - at least for a downtown sliver. Check, check check and check.

A lot has happened in Manchester over the past two or three years and more may be in store. Ground may be broken for a new library later this year. Hunter Park, the home of the Riley Rink and several playing fields and fairgrounds, is hoping a recently announced capital campaign will finance a few more playing fields, of the kind that attract multi-school tournaments and the dollars pumped into the local economy such events bring. Another study on reviewing the Depot Street corridor to make it more of a pedestrian-friendly avenue and less of a high-speed boulevard is under consideration. All the activity hasn't gone unnoticed, and is in part at least serving to help prompt the Vermont Council on Rural Development into staging one of its occasional "Community Visits" next month. These visits are a device to help communities who feel themselves to be at a point of readiness to discuss future directions, needs and opportunities, and plot a course towards getting there, said Paul Costello, the council's executive director.

Planning for the Manchester "visit" - which is expected to take place sometime towards the end of February - is already well underway, he said. It costs the council about \$20,000 to finance one of these visits, which typically involve a team of 30-40 people descending on a community for conversations with a cross-section of the community, followed by a large community gathering to discuss future directions for the town. All told, it amounts to a 4 month-long process, beginning with organizing some local leaders as a steering committee and framing issues for discussion, he said. But towns have to be in the right developmental place for one of these visits, which are approved by the council's board of directors. Only communities that have not only expressed an interest, but seem ready to consider the "big picture" of their near future, get picked, Costello said.

"In Manchester, everyone said the town has made so much progress in the last few years," he said. "The Roundabout means a lot to several people in terms of the feel of the community, but the loss of some of the outlet stores and some of the new creative business development that's been gong on may be setting new trends in how the economy may work. People want to explore those directions and set new vision points for the next stage of economic development."

The consensus of a group of community leaders who recently gathered at the Town Hall to discuss the next possible steps for Manchester - aside from consolidating that which has already been largely built, like the Roundabout and the Park House, and bringing along projects already being planned for, such as the new library - was that the next few years may see comparatively lower profile activity. But there will be activity, and hopefully growth, nevertheless, several said over the course of an hour-long discussion. "People are inspired right now by what's been accomplished, so I think there's a certain momentum there that people want to continue, as well as a desire to let the dust settle," said Ivan Beattie, the chairman of the town's Select Board.

The "visit" will come against a background of a period of some aggressive development, both in the public and private sectors, said Planning Director and Zoning Administrator Lee Krohn, ticking off a list of new projects at a recent meeting of several community leaders at Manchester's Town Hall. The Roundabout and the Park House are high profile ones, but so are things like the ownership of Bagel Works buying the building they've been renting for years, and the sale of a outlet store development on Main Street - the Battenkill Plaza development that currently includes the Gap and Banana Republic outlet stores - for \$2.6 million last November to another developer.

"There's a lot of interest in investment in the community and we wouldn't have that if people didn't have confidence in the future of this community and where it's going," he said.

While projects like the facelift of Depot Street may be on the margins, there's a sense among the town's political leadership that now - or the near future - might be a good time for the public sector to step to one side and let the private sector step forward and begin to invest its own money. "We've done \$6-7 million in work over the last two

years," said Town Manager John O'Keefe. "At some point, people get turned off by construction, and at some point we have to get out of the way of investors."

If money were no object, there are still some things on the table that would be nice to finish off, such as burying the remaining power lines on Main Street and the "traffic calming" project on Depot street, Krohn said. Another useful project might be getting something going on the old airport site off of Richville Road.

But those may have to wait a little longer while the town absorbs all that has taken place in the last few years, as the region and state, as well as the country as a whole, continues a slow recovery from the economic recession that officially started in the last quarter of 2007.

The downturn was not as harsh here as elsewhere, said Pauline Moore, the town's head lister and economic development officer. Data from the state tax department's Web site indicates that gross sales from meals, rooms and alcohol are trending upwards again since 2009, and approaching pre-recessionary levels. The retail sector was hit far harder, and sales data seems to show that business volume, as reflected in sales, was down more than 37 percent - about \$55 million - when 2011 data is compared to 2005. But it's also on it's way back up, Moore said.

"They're still coming because we do things," she said.

Some of the age-old advantages of the area still hold true, like a visually attractive setting between two mountain ranges that offers both scenic beauty and four-season recreational opportunities. And with more and more business being done online and "remotely," from locations that need not be tied to a factory or a particular market, it should be possible for Manchester to entice people involved in the knowledge economy to not only visit here, but move here permanently, said businessman Bill Drunic.

"I think we want to position ourselves so that Manchester is the destination place where people park themselves for many days at a time," he said. "Quality of life" remains a major asset for Manchester, a major reason why people come here and why they stay.

Here, small-town America collides with globalized commerce, but well-regarded schools, a perception that this is a relatively safe area with a low crime rate, combined with strong environmental assets, underpin the desirability of living here and tapping into that better-than-average quality of life. But it doesn't come free either, Beattie said.

"There's a cosmopolitan atmosphere here for a town of 4,000 people, but you make sacrifices to be here for the quality of life," he said, apparently alluding to the cost of living here and the possibilities of making more money working elsewhere. "People are here... because they want to be, and that's reflected in community volunteerism."

Meanwhile, all is not rosy across the board. Two issues that loom large are the relatively high cost of housing - an impediment to business growth - as well as a relative absence of people in their 20s and 30s who for whatever the reasons, find it possible to take a pass on Manchester and its "quality of life."

That demographic group is looking for good jobs, but also for socializing opportunities, said O'Keefe, the town manager. A more expansive night life scene would not hurt efforts to attract younger workers - in their 20s and 30s - to move here or stay here, he added.

The lack of a younger workforce - described by some as a "chicken and egg" problem during the discussion - can give prospective companies who might be interested in moving here pause for thought, Beattie said.

"The problem is that when companies come looking to locate here, (it's) not clear there's a large enough skilled workforce," he said.

But maybe Manchester can't have it all ways, said Moore, the economic development officer.

"Maybe we have to decide who we are - we can't do everything," she said. "Maybe it's kids and middle aged (people)."

Offsetting that to a degree was a consensus that the perception, at least, of the area's schools was a strong one, and that the high quality of education offered locally was a real inducement to families looking to move here.

When it came to the state of the local regulatory environment, the ordinances in place were felt to strike a good balance between allowing for growth and development, while not making it so easy that such growth isn't carefully thought-out.

Since first introducing zoning regulations in the early 1970s, the town has come a long way, Beattie said.

"We have good regulations - they're restrictive - but not difficult to understand," he said. "If you propose something that permissible, it's relatively easy. I think it should be difficult to develop here in town, because through that process you get better quality."

The mix of the flurry of recent activity, economic rebound, and historical advantages Manchester has enjoyed as a result of its location and geography, make the timing of the upcoming "Community Visit" a good one, all agreed.

"There's been a constellation of factors, not all of our creation," said Krohn, the town's planning director and zoning administrator. "The 'Community Visit' was triggered in part by appreciation by the VCRD for the community's (ability) to follow through and not just file a report."

Manchester has evolved over time, from a manufacturing-based economy to one now built around retail, tourism and services. But at least it has always had some kind of base around which to build, said Beattie.

"We need to understand who we are; we need to understand with whom that plays," he said. "But we need to understand what we need to be and is there a way to get there - and then ultimately, what is government's role? A lot of this is private sector-driven. If we can get to a healthy momentum of a healthy private sector and a diversification with that, it will create a dynamic for that."