

Manchester explores its future

Bennington Banner

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MANCHESTER -- On the one hand, challenges - youth emigration; lack of nightlife; a need for more regional transportation; more integrated communication. On the other hand, opportunities - beautiful natural scenery; a vibrant arts and cultural scene; strong local schools, a long-lasting second homeowner base.

A task force of more than 30 high-profiled "movers and shakers" swept into town on March 11 to conduct a "Community Visit," organized by the Vermont Council on Rural Development. The council has staged more than 40 of these visits before, including a recent one in Bennington, said Paul Costello, the council's executive director.

"We're here to support the future of Manchester," he said in the course of introductory remarks at a community dinner held at Burr and Burton Academy Monday evening.

"It's a huge party for the town; a huge celebration."

Residents and outsiders

The council's Community Visit program brings together residents and outside experts to discuss and potentially set common goals and link them to the resources that could translate them into actuality. The resource team brought a cross-section of leaders from the state's business, non-profit and governmental worlds to attend nine separate discussions at three different locations around town, concluding with the community dinner and three of the discussions Monday evening.

Meeting topics included Tourism and Transportation, Housing, Downtown, Expanding Economic Opportunity, Poverty, Working Landscape and food sustainability during the afternoon, with "Defining Authentic Manchester," Education and a discussion of arts, recreation and nightlife making up the evening sessions.

All told, about 300 or so residents turned out for the events.

said Ivan Beattie, the chairman of the town's select board, who made it to parts of all nine of the discussions, he said.

Just having 30 high-powered state leaders to come to town and get a fresh look at the community was significant and would be an asset for the town going forward, he said.

They saw a different community from the one typically portrayed outside of Manchester, Beattie said, one which was not all about retail outlets and tourist shopping.

"They were struck by two things: One, the 'golden eggs' are not evenly distributed around town, and two, the people who reside here are extremely interested in the town and want to be involved in what happens here," he said. "It was certainly interesting to see what someone else's perspective was on what they heard."

Ten of the team members joined about 50 community members in the meeting room at the firehouse to listen to a discussion about the pluses and minuses of where things stood on tourism and transportation. Tourism has been a bedrock business in town since its earliest days, and getting people here, and getting them to move around once they're here, has prompted much debate for a long time. Recently, that has included hoping for a return of passenger rail service to Manchester, a topic that came up more than once during the 90 minute discussion. But there was more than just trains to consider.

Several townspeople lamented the lack of a more robust regional bus service, or any kind of real, practical alternatives to private cars. Natural scenic beauty -- and its proximity to town -- was one big asset; so was the town's relative nearness to major metropolitan areas. Golf, Riley Rink, ski areas and an airport in Rutland were also pluses.

It also meant that the price of gas was a critical factor, said Beth Whitaker, a co-owner of the restaurant Brasserie L'Oustau.

More subtle changes were also noted as well. David Katz, the owner of the Chalet Motel, recalled when owners of other tourist businesses and restaurants would personally stop by to drop off brochures or information about their businesses. That doesn't happen as much any more, he said.

"There used to be more cooperation between tourist venues, more communication," he said.

Other issues were touched on as well. Regulations initially put in place to control growth may now be inhibiting the growth of the local tourist industry, said Lee Romano of Dorset. Meshing and integrating locally owned, independent mom-and-pop-style shops with the corporate outlet stores would be one challenge, said John Conte. Better signage would be a big help, added Michael Bober, who said he was a relative newcomer to the town. Finding a balance between growth and maintaining the unique character of Manchester was the key, said Frank Haynes, a co-owner of the Inn at Manchester.

When it came time for the following session on expanding economic opportunity, the conversation quickly turned to workforce issues. Given the fact that many businesses were seasonal made hiring the right people challenging, said Whitaker, of Brasserie L'Oustau. "It's difficult for us to hire and hold onto employees," she said. "Every three months we have to change our staff." It's hard to find good people, because they know they can walk away and go someplace else, she added.

There was also a lack of things going on to attract young professionals, said Paul Carroccio Sr.

"There's really nothing in town," he said. "Young professionals are reluctant to settle here because of that," comparing the absence of a music or nightlife social scene with places like Burlington or Saratoga, N.Y.

Was that due to a lack of economic opportunity - young professionals weren't moving here in large numbers because they can't find good-paying jobs - or was it because Manchester didn't have a lot of social opportunities to attract them in the first place? It was something of a chicken-and-egg situation, several said. Others noted high rents, which made it hard for younger entrepreneurs to open small shops that could be starter businesses, or cheap, rentable space in a business incubator setting that would allow a start-up to get on its feet. Housing costs, electric costs, empty storefronts, marketing the community in the right way were all subjects that come up for rapid-fire analysis and debate during the session moderated by Lawrence Miller, the Secretary of the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development. Another theme also emerged that would come up again during the discussion on arts and nightlife - communication. "There are real pockets of things happening that speak directly to the challenges that people are presenting," said Joe Wagner, a local CPA and chairman of the Chamber of Commerce's board of directors. "We don't have a good mechanism for communicating all the things that are going on. We don't have an adequate way of delivering information to the community in a way that everyone's involved in that mechanism, so that we can all be uplifted by all the things that are positive." That theme, plus others that included lack of nightlife, the lack of a youth network, and especially the lack of a post-secondary education facility such as a satellite campus of a college, were revisited during the evening session on arts, recreation and nightlife at Burr and Burton Academy following the community dinner. At the same time others noted how, for a relatively small community of about 4,300 residents, there was a lot of special events and things going on, ranging from the summer horse show to winter skiing and snowboarding events. The new library is also being designed to serve as a community center which, if successful, should fill a need for centrally located public meeting space. In about a month, members of the resource team will compile a report and return to town for a follow up session to present their findings and reactions. That report will hopefully help link up some of the ideas which surfaced during the discussions with mapping out action plans to achieve them, said Brian Keefe, the local chairman of the Community Visit. Finding solutions to some of the perceived issues confronting the town may involve squaring the occasionally contradictory circle of a small community that likes to think big, and that saw peaks and valleys in its economic cycles. "It's all about critical mass," he said. "To sustain any one of these endeavors on a 12-month basis is a challenge. The busy times are busy, but we have to remind ourselves we're a small community."