

Guilford plans for future

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GUILFORD -- Having decided where they want to go, Guilford residents now will try to figure out how to get there.

As the latest step in a planning process organized by the Vermont Council on Rural Development, residents have settled on three priorities -- redeveloping the grange, further development of Guilford Community Church and creating a small-business incubator.

Now, residents and experts will team up -- with the next discussions scheduled for 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. Dec. 4 at Guilford Central School -- to find ways to move those plans forward.

"They want to do a lot," said Paul Costello, Vermont Council on Rural Development executive director. "There's a lot of energy."

The council works with towns to determine community goals and then to assist residents in finding the expertise and resources to accomplish those goals.

The process in Guilford has included an Oct. 15 community-visit day, which attracted more than 100 people. Topics that day included seniors' quality of life; parks, trails and outdoor recreation; community buildings; agriculture; and youth and recreation.

Next was a Nov. 12 "community meeting," where more than 80 residents gathered at Guilford Central School to decide what projects the town should pursue.

A list of 20 "significant project ideas" was whittled to six and then to three. That was not an easy job, organizers said; ideas that were set aside may, in fact, become part of a "long-term agenda" for the town.

In some instances, it was decided that Guilford residents could find ways to make positive change happen without outside help, said Town Administrator Katie Buckley.

"A good example is a farm-and-food network," Buckley said. "We could easily do that in a grass-roots way here."

For now, remainder of the community visit process will focus on the grange, the church and a small-business incubator. Those will be up for further planning at next week's session.

"We're expecting a good crew on Dec. 4 to frame out ways to move each of the action steps forward," Costello said.

At the last meeting, some residents signed up for task-force groups to work on those projects. Costello said more such volunteers are needed: Anyone interested can call the council at 802-223-6091 or send an e-mail to info@vtrural.org.

Helping guide the task forces next week will be a team of experts including Paul Bruhn, executive director

of The Preservation Trust of Vermont; Patricia Moulton Powden of Brattleboro Development Credit Corp.; Robert McBride, Rockingham Arts & Museum Project founding director; Steve Ames, former director of River Arts in Morrisville; Lars Torres, who directs the state Office of the Creative Economy; and Sharon Combes-Farr, Vermont Digital Economy Project director.

A representative of Windham Regional Commission also is expected.

Among those looking forward to the session -- and the possible results of those discussions -- is Lise Sparrow, pastor of Guilford Community Church.

She is pleased that the proposed development of a community center and an early childhood education center at the church has been chosen as a high priority by Guilford residents.

"It's a great program," Sparrow said of the "community visit" process. "We're hoping it's great timing."

By that, she means that the community planning happening as the church is continuing talks with Windham Child Care Association and Guilford Cares. Those talks are aimed at bringing a children's educational center, Guilford's food pantry and the Guilford Cares medical-equipment program to the Algiers Village church.

"The idea is to actually have space at the church to host those entities," Sparrow said, adding that "we have drawings and a plan to expand the church building."

The guidance and focus provided by the community visit process could help move those projects forward, Sparrow said. But she made clear that "we are going to do this whether or not we get funding through the visit program."

Next week's session is the last that will be organized and led by Vermont Council on Rural Development, Costello said. After that, the volunteer task forces will take over.

So far, the process has gotten good reviews.

Belinda Lashway, Guilford Community Visit chairwoman, declared that she is "so proud of Guilford."

And Buckley said the group discussions have been "great."

"It's not a town project. It's a community project," Buckley said. "The community has driven this process."

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