

1996-97 Richford Community Visit

Executive Summary

The Vermont Rural Development Council, one of 39 State Rural Councils nationwide, was established in 1992 with the assistance of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Partnership Office and the Governor's Office. The Council is structured as a private / public partnership with a broadly based board of over 20 directors representing six partner groups (federal, state, local, private, non-profit, and education). In 1996 the Vermont Council on Rural Development decided to employ the community visit model as a way to listen to rural communities and thereby gain an understanding of community issues. The Community Visit model has been used extensively by the Rural Councils in New Hampshire and Texas. The visit is designed for listening, raising issues, and brainstorming by bringing together a broad mix of community people and a resource team made up of Council members and statewide resource providers. The Community Visit allows important problems and issues to surface informally.

The Village and Town of Richford, VT were chosen as the Council's first visit due to the desire of local leaders to participate in this project. The community has faced some tough economic and social challenges over the past few years. The village leaders sensed that a "community visit" proposed by the Council would be extremely beneficial to help the community chart its future and gain perspectives from residents within the community who normally are not heard. The focus groups were designed jointly by the Council and the Town's Administrative Assistant, a key component being the recruitment of village and town residents to join in the focus groups. This was done extremely well by the community leaders of Richford. The pace of the day was hectic for resource team members, but all who participated felt energized by this process in the end. There were five main stages to the Richford Community Visit:

1. On November 8, 1996, the Council's resource team split into three teams of about seven people and spent the day attending four concurrent **focus groups** where a broad mix of over 80 community people discussed an array of topics from business to social services and health care. Each team listened and took notes. At the end of the day the folks in Richford sponsored a spaghetti dinner at Dorian Hall complete with speeches and banjo music.
2. Next, the Council condensed the focus group notes and then created a list of issues raised in more than one focus group. This list reflects the major concerns of community people and was written in their voice, as much as possible.
3. It was then decided to call a special **public meeting** on December 3, 1996 (in Town Meeting style) so that a broadly-based group of Richford residents could prioritize the list of major issues developed from the focus

- group notes. Over 60 people attended the meeting and the list of 19 major issues was whittled down using a modified group voting process. First the list was reduced to ten major issues; then the group agreed on the top five priority issues. After the voting was complete, people were asked to sign-up for committees that would deal with each specific issue. The Vermont Office of Economic Opportunity will be hosting a workshop designed to help these committee members to approach their complex issues effectively.
4. The prioritized list was then distributed to the Council's resource team to solicit their input, ideas, recommendations, ideas for funding sources, and specific people to contact.
 5. The final stage of the Community Visit process is the production of this report which can serve as a working document to help the various issue committees organize their respective work plans.

Overall the Vermont Council is extremely pleased with the Richford Community Visit. The Council is especially appreciative to the Resource Team members for freely sharing their time and creative ideas. Many thanks go to all the community folks who participated in the focus groups and in the special public meeting. A special thanks goes to Laura Ovitt, the Richford Town Administrative Assistant, who believed in the process from the beginning and supported it throughout.

Top Ten Issues

1. **Village and Town Merger Issue** - concern over possible duplication of services and the economies of a possible merger
2. **Police Enforcement Issue** - concern over effectiveness of State Policing contract, lack of probationary follow-up, no consequences for negative behavior, recent number of break-ins and vandalism
3. **New Jobs Issue** - need to create new jobs in Richford that provide a living wage, create opportunities for recent high school graduates, avoid the need to commute to St Albans or Burlington, and expand grand list
4. **Richford Image Issue** - improve and promote Richford's image given its good school system, great natural beauty, and good public facilities
5. **Sweat Comings Issue** - concern over future of vacant buildings, the impact on image of Village to have boarded-up buildings, and the loss of jobs
6. **Youth Activities Issue** - concern over lack of after-school opportunities for youth, and the resulting loitering in the Village...some programs have been successful but there is a need for more opportunities and leadership
7. **Branch River Bridge Issue** - Richford has approved partial funding, state has not committed, needs follow-up
8. **Ambulance and Fire Facilities Issue** - Richford has approved partial funding, need to fill the gap and find a home for these two services

9. **Public Assistance Issue** - concern over high rate of people and families on some form of public assistance in Richford and the social and economic impacts and costs associated with this situation
 10. **Village Banking Issue** - concern about possible re-location of Franklin Lamoille Bank out of the Village and the possible need for more competition
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Resource Team List

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Update on Richford, 9/22/97

In November and December of 1996, Richford participated in a Community Visit conducted by the Vermont Council on Rural Development. Richford is a community of about 2,200 people and is located in the north central part of Vermont along its border with Canada. During the Visit groups of Richford residents, more than 70 in all, met with the Visit team - 23 people from regional, state and federal organizations - to talk about Richford's problems and potential. The Visit resulted in a list of ten major issues, identified and voted on by Richford residents, with the top five issues prioritized as follows:

- Merge the Town and Village into one Political entity
- Improve the level of police protection
- Bring new jobs to Richford
- Improve the image of Richford (especially downtown)
- Find a creative solution to the closing of the Sweat-Comings Furniture Plant

The Visit team suggested various methods and ideas to assist in addressing each of these issues. Richford citizens volunteered to serve on committees to address these issues, and met for a training and kick-off meeting in March of this year. Below is a list of the major work that has been accomplished toward addressing these critical issues:

- A subcommittee was formed and hosted public meetings with respect to the merger issue. Votes were held in both the Village and Town in September and both votes supported the merger by a large margin. (This issue had failed twice in the past.) The issue will now go to the Vermont Legislature for ratification.
- A neighborhood watch program has been formed with over 300 members and the police services contract with the Vermont State Police has been reviewed.

- A Jobs Committee was formed and issued a survey of existing employment in Richford. Survey results will help the town plan a strategy.
- Several activities have been initiated to improve Richford's image including a plan for a new river access recreational area and foot bridge over the Missisquoi River.
- A full color brochure has been developed and distributed to regional, state and federal economic development agencies, which specifically addresses the Sweat-Comings Building and other available commercial/industrial properties in Richford.

In September of 1997 the Town of Richford received a \$ 5000.00 Hometown Leaders Award for the work done around the Community Visit. The award was granted by the National Center for Small Communities in Washington, D.C. This money will be used to help address the issues raised by the Community Visit.