

1998 Rockingham Community Visit

Executive Summary

The Vermont Rural Development Council (VCRD), one of 38 State Rural Development Councils nationwide, was established in 1992 with the assistance of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Governor's Office. VCRD is structured as a not-for-profit corporation with a broadly based board of 20 directors representing five partner groups (federal, state, local, private, and non-profit). In 1996 VCRD learned about a community development tool called a "Community Visit." This model provides a way to listen to rural communities and thereby gain an understanding of community issues at the ground level. The Community Visit model has been used extensively by the State Rural Development Councils in New Hampshire and Texas. A Community Visit brings together a broad mix of community people, and a "Resource Team" made up of VCRD Directors and state and federal resource providers. The Community Visit allows important issues and challenges to surface informally, from a local perspective. VCRD has used this model in Richford and the results were very positive.

The Town of Rockingham was chosen because VCRD wanted to work in a southern Vermont community, and Rockingham had a strong network of community level associations. This past spring the Rockingham Selectboard was approached by VCRD with the Community Visit concept, and they agreed to participate. The village leaders sensed that a Community Visit might be beneficial to help the town chart its future and gain perspectives from residents within the community who normally are not heard. The Community Visit process and the focus groups were designed jointly by VCRD and representatives of the Our Town group. The Our Town group was a critical component in the Visit process especially with the recruitment of focus group participants. There were four main stages to the Rockingham Community Visit:

1. On June 24, the VCRD Resource Team met at the Sonnax Corporation and split into three teams. One team spent the day in Bellows Falls, another in Saxon's River, and the third team spent the day on the hill in Rockingham. During the day the teams attended three different **focus groups** where a broad mix of over 60 community people discussed an array of topics from business, to tourism, to social services and health care. That evening the Our Town group sponsored a community dinner at Masonic Hall complete with a speech from Rockingham's own Michael Obuchowski, Speaker of the Vermont House.
2. Next, VCRD condensed the Resources Team's notes from the focus groups, and created a **list of common issues and challenges**. This list reflected the major issues and challenges as identified by the community

- people who attended the focus groups. An effort was made to write the list in their voice.
3. A **public meeting** was then called for August 26 (in Town Meeting style), so that a broadly-based group of Rockingham citizens could prioritize the list of major issues and challenges. Over 50 people attended this public meeting and the list of 17 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. Once these committees are up and working, VCRD will host a leadership training workshop.
 4. The prioritized list of issues and challenges was then distributed to VCRD's Resource Team to solicit their input, recommendations, ideas for funding sources, and specific contact people. These recommendations are included in this **Community Visit Final Report**. This report is meant to serve as a working document to help the various issue committees organize their respective strategic work plans.

Overall, the Vermont Council on Rural Development is very pleased with the Rockingham Community Visit process. VCRD is especially appreciative to the Resource Team members for freely sharing their time and creative ideas. Many thanks also go to all the community citizens who participated in the focus groups and at the special public meeting. A special thanks goes to Linda Maresca and Jeanie Levesque, of the Our Town group, who both believed in the process from the beginning and supported it throughout.

Top Ten Issues

1. **Educational Issue** - increase parental involvement, provide better opportunities and access for adult education, improve vocational opportunities, and improve the overall image and quality of education in Rockingham
2. **Revitalize Bellows Falls Village Issue** - need to renovate many buildings...fill vacant buildings with focus on Windham Hotel, Municipal Building, and other key structures
3. **Housing Issue** - provide more single family living opportunities and incentives to convert from renting to owning.... need to access and improve health and safety issues at rental units
4. **Teen Issue** - need to expand opportunities for teenagers, especially during the after school time period....concern over teen-vandalism in community
5. **Community Image Issue** - need to improve Rockingham's image, develop a vision for the future, and increase community pride

6. **Sales Tax Issue** - focus on differences between NH and VT sales tax policy and inform people that prices are not always lower in NH
 7. **Community Collaboration and Communication Issue** - need for better communication between people within the community and better cooperation between groups and organizations
 8. **Local Government Issue** - need to improve communication between villages, reduce "turf" issues, hire a full-time municipal economic development officer, and streamline local government
 9. **Workforce Development Issue** - develop a skilled workforce in Rockingham, train high school students for local job opportunities, improve communication between businesses and schools, address why Rockingham youth leave after High School and why few return
 10. **Chamber of Commerce Issue** - need to strengthen Chamber's role in community, improve coordination with other local groups, and need for a full-time staff position
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Resource Team List

RESOURCE TEAM - A (Business and Housing - Rockingham Village)

Wayne Fawbush, Executive Director of Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (Team Facilitator)

Tom Guerino, Executive Director of Massachusetts Rural Development Council

Patricia Menduni, Staff at Senator Jefford's Rutland Office

Bill McGrath, Executive Director of Brattleboro Regional Development Corporation

Linda Hall, Special Project Coordinator at Department of Employment and Training

David Robinson, Business and Industry Specialist at USDA

Rich Smith, Deputy Commissioner Department of Economic Development

Representative Gaye Symington, Board of Vermont Community Loan Fund

Samara CRS (SCRIBE)

RESOURCE TEAM - B (Tourism, Art and The Public Sector - Saxton River Village)

Chuck Bagley, Executive Director New Hampshire Rural Development Council

Vaughn T. Collins, Executive Director Vermont Council on Rural Development (Team Facilitator)

Chris Jolly, Federal Highway Administration

Jane Brown, Vermont Agency of Transportation

Betty Frye, Private Consultant

Barbara Grimes, Commissioner of Housing and Community Development

Naomi Hatch, Rural Development Specialist at USDA

Lew Sorenson, Executive Director Regional Planning Commission
Gavin CRS (SCRIBE)

RESOURCE TEAM - C (Education, Health and Natural Resources - Bellows Falls)

Dennis Borchardt, Executive Director Aiken RCD Council (Team Facilitator)
Joel Moore, Selectman from Town of Bradford
Tony Morgan, Office of Economic Opportunity
Representative Paul Poirier, Community Relations at Green Mountain Power
Fred Schmidt, Center for Rural Studies at UVM
David Tucker, Director Office of Economic Opportunity
Sherry USDA (SCRIBE)