

# Bellows Falls

## CREATIVE COMMUNITIES PROGRAM FINAL REPORT AND ACTION PLAN



2006 - 2007

Vermont Council on Rural Development

# Bellows Falls Creative Communities Program

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## **Background on the Creative Communities Program**

Organizations around the world, including several in New England, have studied and set their own definitions of the “creative economy.” Some definitions focus on the revenue generated by particular creative sectors that fit standard business categories, others focus on the individual qualities of creative workers, and still others attempt to pinpoint specific policies that spark creativity in *every* worker.

The Creative Communities Program considers all existing creative economy perspectives and uses a working definition with three key components that are common to most creative economy discussions:

### **•The Importance of Place:**

Our discussion of “place” includes the natural, physical and community environments that form the foundation for creative economy work. Is this a place where people will *want* to work, live, and participate as active citizens? Is there a healthy mix of culture and commerce? Is there a strong community identity that distinguishes this place from any other?

### **•Creative Partnerships:**

The 2004 *Advancing Vermont’s Creative Economy* report began to outline the breadth of businesses, individuals, and organizations that contribute to a strong economy. These contributors include groups that have not traditionally been thought of as business partners, such as arts, heritage, place-based, and other (usually) not-for-profit organizations. They are core partners in economic development discussions. Who needs to be at the table to help build a strong local economy?

### **•Individuals’ Creative Skills:**

Businesses in every field generate a competitive advantage from new ideas and unique skills – how do we increase business’ ability to capitalize on creative contributions? What type of environment attracts and retains today’s top creative thinkers? What inspires creative thinking in *everyone* in a community?

The Creative Communities Program began in October 2005, with funding from Jane’s Trust. It takes a step towards implementing the recommendations outlined by the Vermont Council on Culture and Innovation in their 2004 report *Advancing Vermont’s Creative Economy*. The Creative Communities Program works with communities around Vermont to jumpstart their local creative economy through comprehensive public outreach, facilitated public forums, action plans developed around specific projects, and connections to a statewide network of resources. The section on the *Creative Communities Program Process in Bellows Falls* describes how Bellows Falls modified the original template for the program to match their particular needs as a community that had already completed several years of creative economy work.



## **Background to Bellows Falls' Participation**

By 2003, the idea of the creative economy had become pervasive in Vermont, but few policy makers or local leaders had an understanding of how to advance this opportunity systematically in state policy or in practice in towns throughout the state. The Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) convened the Vermont Council on Culture and Innovation (VCCI) to craft a strategic plan that would coordinate the work of statewide leadership, the congressional delegation and state legislature, and provide community leaders with a guide to practical action. The final product, *Advancing Vermont's Creative Economy*, was formally issued at the beginning of the 2005 Vermont Legislative session.

Among other findings, the report presented cases of successful Vermont towns that had used a creative economy framework for development long before the term “creative economy” became well known. These towns demonstrate how cultural and community development can serve as a foundation for local economic development. The culture of creativity fostered in these regions has encouraged innovative businesses to settle locally, supported innovation within existing businesses, helped retain residents and attract new ones, and provided a basis for companies to recruit new employees to the area.

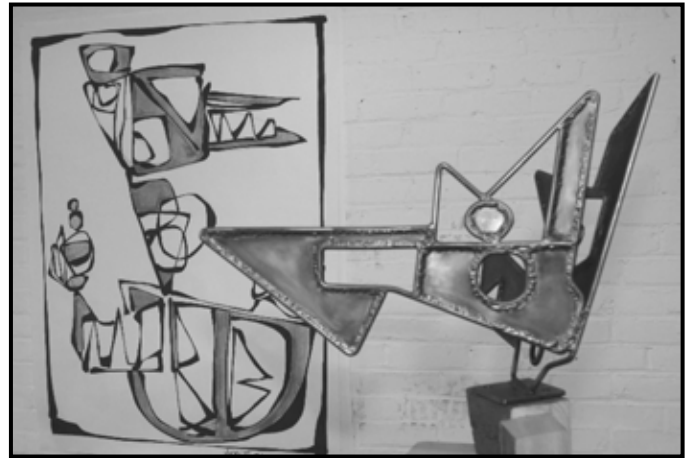
Bellows Falls Village in the town of Rockingham, provided one of the prominent examples cited in *Advancing Vermont's Creative Economy*. The report's case study points to ways in which Bellows Falls has begun to recapture its old position as an active market town for its region. Bellows Falls started to fade in the 1930's as mills closed. By the late 1990's a rebirth had reversed the village's image as a place on the decline and built an image of a vibrant and authentic Vermont town on the move. Arts played a large part in this change. The Rockingham Arts and Museum Project (RAMP- <http://www.ramp-vt.org>) in particular built a cultural scene integrated with economic development measures. An early project renovating the derelict Exner Block building in the downtown combined historic preservation, affordable housing, artists' living space, studios, galleries and shops. Partnerships with Housing Vermont, Rockingham Area Community Land Trust, Preservation Trust of Vermont and effective use of tax credits created ten living / work spaces for artists and six retail spaces that set a model for further redevelopment activity downtown. Arts-based organizations also began to move to Bellows Falls, including the Great River Arts Institute and Charlie Hunter's Flying Under Radar music management company.

The core of arts and cultural activities in Bellows Falls expanded and served as a lever for revitalization that has informed economic development in every sector. For example, Chroma Technologies, a high tech optics company, has moved to Bellows Falls partially because of its strong cultural life. SoVerNet, an Internet services provider founded in Bellows Falls, is another part of the technology scene. Established downtown businesses have looked at strategies to maximize the positive impact of a community where more things are happening and more people pass through the downtown. The goal is for everyone to benefit from a revitalized village center.

Robert McBride, RAMP's founder, describes the underlying framework for the creative economy in Bellows Falls as people looking at where their own interests lie and then contributing back to the community from that starting point. When McBride settled permanently in Bellows Fall in the 1990's, his interest and background in the arts provided that point. Today,

the positive environment and more optimistic outlook in Bellows Falls encourage residents to pursue their interests in any field.

Robert McBride and Richard Ewald, Development Director for the Town of Rockingham, have shared the position of leading Bellows Falls' creative economy partnership with the Vermont Council on Rural Development. They have highlighted the intersection of culture, community, history and economic prosperity in setting goals for



Creative Communities Program work. Earlier creative economy efforts had pointed towards a larger theme of re-establishing Bellows Falls as the market center for the surrounding region. The role of market town combines the vibrant cultural scene and strong commercial base required for becoming a true regional center, as Bellows Falls was a century ago. It builds on both meeting core local needs, for example with the hardware store, post office, municipal offices, eateries, bookstores and stationary stop downtown, as well as presenting an authentic Main Street town to residents and visitors alike. This concept became the overall goal for the Creative Communities Program partnership.

Bellows Falls hosted three workshops related to the creative economy and market town themes during its partnership with the Creative Communities Program. The spring workshop looked at ways to support local agriculture, including extending the season for farmers' local sales beyond the busy summer farmers' market. The summer workshop offered local restaurant owners a chance to come around the table, meet each other, and learn about marketing strategies. A fall workshop and tour explored the Island, the section of the designated downtown bordered by the canal and the Connecticut River, and possible directions for its future.

In addition to the three workshops for local residents, Bellows Falls also served as the site of a statewide creative economy leaders' summit on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006. This meeting included representatives from all nine towns that were then part of the Creative Communities Program, along with participants from other areas working on their own local creative economy. The summit allowed communities to learn more about projects happening around the state, hear about potential funding resources, and discuss their own projects. Tours of downtown Bellows Falls and afternoon discussion groups allowed the village to serve as a learning laboratory for developing a strong creative economy.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development has enjoyed working with everyone involved in Bellows Falls' Creative Communities Program. We would like to especially thank the Great Falls Regional Chamber of Commerce, which manages the Waypoint Visitors Center (part of the Connecticut River National Byway), Sharon Boccelli from Boccelli's on the Canal, and Tonia Fleming at the Great River Arts Institute for hosting our workshops.

This report documents the evolving, thriving creative economy in Bellows Falls and describes some project areas that will keep the community moving forward. The village has pioneered the creative economy concept in Vermont and is now pioneering the next step – furthering and sustaining an economy that has incorporate creative economy initiatives. VCRD is eager to support implementation of ideas developed during the Creative Communities Program.

## **Introduction to Creative Economy Work in Bellows Falls**

Overview Prepared By:  
*Town of Rockingham*  
*Rockingham Arts & Museum Project*  
*Bellows Falls Downtown Development Alliance*

In the mid-1990s, the outlook in Bellows Falls – as in many downtowns in Vermont and across the country – was relatively bleak. Local events, and national and regional economic and cultural trends, had taken their toll on the community and its spirit. Then, in response to what seemed like a crisis, many individuals, groups, and municipal entities were galvanized into action, and have remained active to the present.

One of the most notable grassroots efforts was generated by a new non-profit organization called Our Town. It created the Front Porch Theater Company, which wrote and produced short plays, based on Bellows Falls' history, on the porches of the village's Victorian-era homes. (Front Porch recently reformed under its own banner as the Greater Falls Theater Company). Our Town also began raising funds to renovate the theater in the Rockingham Town Hall, and planted flowers in a variety of places in the downtown. Their "we-can-do-it" attitude was contagious.

Around the same time, new resident and artist Robert McBride founded the Rockingham Arts & Museum Project (RAMP, <http://www.ramp-vt.org/>) based on the concept that art can play a role in economic and community development. RAMP formed partnerships with a broad range of other organizations and the municipality to carry out programs and events that engaged all ages in the arts, including the following projects:

- Community Theater: May 1999, a ten-day residency with Bread and Puppet Theater Group invited by RAMP to Bellows Falls for a memorable event that brought hundreds of people to a performance in the downtown Square, which was closed to traffic for the performance.
- Mural Project: May-September 2000, creating a 30' x 40' historically accurate mural of the downtown circa 1910 which greets residents and visitors to the downtown.
- The Exner Block: October 1998-October 2000, working in partnership with Housing Vermont and the Rockingham Area Community Land Trust, promoting the renovation of a derelict building in downtown into ten affordable live-work spaces for artists and six retail spaces with a focus on the arts.
- Artists Create Community Millennium Project: Hosted in 2000, one arts organization from each state was invited to participate. The project was sponsored by National Endowment for the Arts and The Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation. RAMP selected Seattle based artist Beliz Brothers to participate in the project.
- Public Art Moving Site: A collaborative project between the Cambridge Arts Council, MA, ArtSpace, New Haven, CT and RAMP recently was selected in the Americans for the Arts Public Art Network (PAN) Year in Review. The project was selected as one of the Top 20 projects completed in the public art field in the previous year by curator Robert Rindler, Dean of the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design.

RAMP mission offers support toward all artistic efforts in the community. One example is Charlie Hunter's success in putting Bellows Falls on the map for a local live music scene, first in Oona's Restaurant, and then at The Windham, and now at Boccelli's on the Canal. The annual



Roots on the River four-day music festival in June, begun by Hunter in 2000, now takes its place alongside Rockingham Old Home Days as one of the community's signature celebrations.

A new low-watt FM radio station, WOOL 100.1, known as Black Sheep Radio, is broadcasting music, news, and local cultural offerings to the community from a former industrial space on the Island. The studio is located adjacent to Great River Arts, a non-profit arts organization that, among other programs, produces master-level classes for a variety of media.



In 1998, the Town ([www.rockbf.org](http://www.rockbf.org)) sponsored the Rockingham Community Visit conducted by the Vermont Council on Rural Development. Over the course of many months, scores of residents took place in brain-storming sessions to identify community issues and suggest solutions. The meetings produced a list of “Top Ten Issues” and a consensus to get moving on as many as possible. In 1999, the Town of Rockingham successfully applied for “designated downtown” status with the Vermont Downtown Program. (Several years later, the Village of Saxtons River was awarded the status of “designated village center.”) In 1999, the Bellows Falls Downtown Development Alliance (BFDDA, [www.bellowsfalls.org](http://www.bellowsfalls.org)) was established as the non-profit organization devoted to carrying out an ongoing revitalization program. As part of those efforts, the BFDDA has sponsored downtown decorations and events, including live music.

In 2000, the town celebrated the completion of the Bellows Falls Waypoint Center, part of the Connecticut River Scenic Byway ([www.ctrivertravel.net](http://www.ctrivertravel.net).) The visitors center is operated by the Great Falls Regional Chamber of Commerce ([www.gfrcc.org](http://www.gfrcc.org).) The design of the visitors center, by architect Daniel V. Scully, incorporates and celebrates Bellows Falls' railroading and architectural history. The building actually resembles a large locomotive and train, and is surmounted by a pair of 150-long steel arches that replicate the angles of the Bellows Falls Arch Bridge, 1905-1982. Interior exhibits celebrate the history and culture of Rockingham and six surrounding towns. From May to October, the Waypoint Center is home to the Bellows Falls Farmers Market, a group of local food and craft producers.

In bricks-and-mortar projects, the period from 2000-2003 witnessed the complete rehabilitation of two large vacant historic buildings in the downtown. The Exner Block, on Canal Street, was rehabilitated for affordable housing for artists, and its first floor commercial space renovated for retail galleries and shops. The building has served as magnet for artists and their work. The Howard Block, located on Bridge Street, was rehabilitated for affordable housing and its 8,000 square feet of first floor commercial space was completely renovated. One of its first tenants was Spheris Gallery, whose other gallery was in New York City.

In 2005, Rockingham voters overwhelmingly approved a \$2.85 million bond to complete renovation of Rockingham Town Hall, to include a thorough renovation of the theater renamed the Bellows Falls Opera House. The Town currently operates the theater for movies five nights a week (except for Wednesday and Thursday). The renovation is nearly complete, and will give the downtown a 550-seat venue for both films and live shows.

During this same period, several businesses in Rockingham demonstrated successfully a high level of creativity in establishing and growing their businesses. Four companies were selected by Vermont Business Magazine for their “5x5x5 awards” which identify the fastest growing Vermont companies in five different sectors. Those honored included SoVerNet, located downtown; and three in the Rockingham Industrial Park – VerMed, Sonnax, and Chroma Technology.

The ongoing and changing creative economy energy in Rockingham, and in Bellows Falls, result from the interactions among these inventive private enterprises, many active non-profit organizations, town and village governmental officials and employees, and hundreds of engaged individuals.





## **Creative Communities Program Process in Bellows Falls**

Bellows Falls began participation in the Creative Communities Program with a significant amount of creative economy experience already in place. Their application to the program cited a decade's worth of revitalization work centered on projects joining culture, community, and economy that would later be recognized as prominent creative economy initiatives in the state. Bellows Falls quickly picked up on statewide interest in exploring the creative economy and began to actively promote that side of its development plans. It hosted two forums as part of the statewide Vermont Council on Culture and Innovation study on the creative economy. In 2004, the Preservation Trust of Vermont held a statewide conference with a "creative community" theme in Bellows Falls. Robert McBride, founder of Rockingham Arts and Museum Project, consults in Vermont and beyond our region on "creative economy" tools. With this background, then, the Creative Communities Program did not represent a completely new endeavor, but instead served as a way to consciously maintain a long-lasting creative economy effort.

The challenges of creative economy growth and of maintaining the momentum in a rural community will always exist; there are no plateaus, even when a town has clear successes to demonstrate the usefulness of the creative economy perspective. At the same time that communities never run out of issues to address they also never run out of new opportunities to follow. Robert McBride and Richard Ewald, who led the Creative Communities Program work in Bellows Falls, were determined to take full advantage of new opportunities for drawing in new participants and bringing energy around new projects.

The Creative Communities Program usually implements a community planning process designed for groups at early stages of considering their creative economy. Bellows Falls adjusted this process to reflect the years of work already in place. The revisions began with a list of projects that had previously appeared as areas of interest for the village, including during the 1998 Community Visit conducted by VCRD, but which had never been selected as priorities for action. Of these projects, three became targets for workshops in 2006: "Beyond the Summer – Supporting Local Growers", "Food Business Get-Together – Restaurant Marketing", and "The Future of the Island". A fourth area of interest, bringing together creative economy leaders from around the state in a peer network, was addressed through a Creative Communities Program conference held in Bellows Falls in November, 2006, and described in a later section.

The following notes summarize the Bellows Falls workshops. These workshops extended invitations to area residents interested in the topic and issued a general public invitation. They also featured resource people brought in by the Creative Communities Program.

# Beyond the Summer -- Supporting Local Growers

Waypoint Center, 11:00am – 1:00pm

Wednesday, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006

**In Attendance:** Lynn Barrett, Sharon Boccelli, Tony Elliott, Richard Ewald, Bianca Fernandez, Pat Fowler, Dale Guldbrandsen, Susan Harlow, Rod Hewitt, Charlie Hunter, Tim Jefferson, Sean Long, Kathy Martin, Sandy Martin, Robert McBride, Paul Millman, Katie Schneider

**Panelists:** Misse Burrows (farmer, Manchester area), Lisa Johnson (Vital Communities), David Lane (Agency of Agriculture), Sally Mole (organizer, Manchester winter farmers' market)

The first workshop for the Creative Communities Program took place on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006, at the Bellows Falls Waypoint Visitors Center. Participants gathered for a lunchtime discussion of how to more actively support not only the existing local Farmers' Market but also local growers during the season (mid-October to mid-May) when the market is closed. This discussion tied into the larger question of how Bellows Falls could regain its reputation as a Market Town in its region. Food sales are one piece of the answer. For example, agriculture provides a natural link to the village's history, introducing Bellows Falls to visitors and re-introducing its history to residents. The farmers' market also offers an effective tool to draw customers into downtown for shopping and a stage for cultural events, such as performances by local musicians.

A visiting team of leaders in Vermont agriculture including David Lane, Vermont's Deputy Secretary of Agriculture; Lisa Johnson, from Vital Communities and two participants in the year-round Manchester farmers' market, Sally Mole and Misse Burrows attended to comment on their experience with the type of issues presented, including what has worked in other communities, obstacles that may not have been anticipated, and options for meeting the village's goals.

## What's Happening Now in Bellows Falls:

While Bellows Falls looks to expand its support of local food and local food producers, workshop attendees also discussed what is happening today that builds a foundation for movement in the future.

- **Summertime Farmers' Market:** A summertime farmers' market meets at the Waypoint Visitors Center (home of the Great Falls Region Chamber of Commerce and part of the Connecticut River National Byway) and has approximately 75-100 customers present at any given time. The farmers' market has also just hired their first market manager and joined the Chamber of Commerce.
- **Activities at the Farmers' Market:** The Bellows Falls farmers' market maintains a set ratio of food to other products to ensure that it remains truly a *farmers'* market. At the same time, the market hosts activities beyond the vendors' stalls help draw in customers. Charlie Hunter arranges popular musical performances. Also, last year the market drew students (and their parents) with the Farm-to-School



Mentors program offered through the Northeast Organic Farming Association (<http://www.nofavt.org/programs/farm-to-school.php>).

- **Boccelli's on the Canal Café Opening:** Sharon Boccelli is opening a new café in downtown Bellows Falls with local foods featured in both the café and retail sections. (Note: In the summer of 2006, Sharon Boccelli completed renovations on a five bay garage, creating a food market and eatery as well as a public space that hosted the 2006 Holiday Farmers' Market).
- **Windham Hotel:** Restoration of the Windham Hotel is another point of downtown revitalization that could include retail space for local foods. It is also an overall draw for visitors to the town.
- **Scene & Herd:** Scene & Herd is a special section in the Brattleboro Reformer that features agriculture in Southern Vermont each spring, and potentially will move to the fall as well. Bellows Falls can participate with either advertising or articles on local food and farm topics. The deadline for this year is May 18<sup>th</sup>, publication is May 25<sup>th</sup>. There is still advertising space. Contact information: Lynn Barrett, Primetime Concepts, Inc. 802-258-3992, [prime@svcable.net](mailto:prime@svcable.net)
- **Burdick's Market:** Across the river, Burdick's has a retail food operation that mimics a European style shop. Paul Millman notes that this shop encourages an eating style that includes shopping every day . . . an approach that often emphasizes the freshness and quality that local foods also highlight. It is a question how much of the Burdick's food comes from local sources. Bellows Falls currently has no equivalent to this store (although Sharon Boccelli notes that her cafe, once open, may offer similar retail options).

## **Comments from Panelists:**

### **Lisa Johnson** (Vital Communities – Valley Food & Farm Program)

Vital Communities offers a range of opportunities for Connecticut River Valley towns, like Bellows Falls, and would be happy to work with the village to identify potential partnerships. Lisa provided examples of several initiatives:

- **Flavors of the Valley** (annual event in early May): Flavors of the Valley is a tasting and learning event to showcase local agricultural products at a time that many consider the start to the local agriculture season. Placing the show early in May serves the additional purpose of highlighting what is available outside of the busy summer season. Restaurant buyers can come early to find out what is available to them from area producers.
- **Locally Grown Guide:** Vital Communities publishes a yearly guide to local food in the Valley. A searchable version is on their website (<http://www.vitalcommunities.org>). Producers who place themselves on the website are included automatically in the published guide.
- Collaborates with Dartmouth on bringing local foods to institutional food service and supports a Localvores group in the Valley.

Bellows Falls can distribute local foods guide, a magnet with farmers' market hours, and other Vital Communities materials.

A general principle for Vital Communities is to educate consumers through developing direct relationships with their local growers.

David Lane (Deputy Secretary, VT Agency of Agriculture)

The Agency of Agriculture emphasizes that agriculture means business for Vermont. This statement both ties agriculture into the larger Vermont economy and points to the business aspects of farming. Dave's section of the agency works on business planning for farms and for increasing consumers' access to Vermont farm products.

National studies show that people eating local food are healthier overall and have an interest in personally knowing where their food comes from. This knowledge is an important part of what farmers' markets offer. The connections formed at farmers' markets open greater engagement in local agriculture.

The Agency of Agriculture maintains a Farmers' Market website at: <http://www.vermontagriculture.com/farmmkt.htm>. Other useful contacts are Ethan Parke at the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and NOFA-VT, which is working on farmers' markets through a community food security initiative.

Misse Burrows (Farmer)

Misse is currently in her 4<sup>th</sup> season on Chapparral Farm. She agrees with Dave that a strong business plan is key. She began her farm with farmers' market and CSA sales. These outlets allowed her to develop a direct relationship with her customers, as well as removing worries like packaging, shipping, and shelf life that affect sales in other stores.

Now her farm's marketing plans are changing and they want to diversify into stores, to be less season dependent, less affected by poor weather (like rain on farmers' market day). She can use the connections from the farmers' market and CSA to make her customers more aware of her products in stores. She is developing brochures and flyers for the same purpose.

The winter farmers' market has been a way to start customers thinking about local food as a year-round concern – and again there is spill over from the direct markets to what individuals look for in retail stores.



Sally Mole (Manchester Winter Farmers' Market)

Sally runs a successful wintertime farmers' market in Manchester, VT. The market currently has 30 vendors in a 1768 farmhouse, which is municipal property. Choosing an attractive venue has been an important part of creating an event that is a wintertime highlight. The market happens every Saturday, January through March, from 10:00am – 2:00 pm (lunch and soups are sold). There are also 2 holiday markets (Thanksgiving & Christmas).

Selling local products outside of summer draws customers' attention to items sometimes lost during the warmer months. Cheese, meat, bread, potatoes, and onions are all popular. Farmers are beginning to grow for the winter season. Misse, for example, is putting up greenhouses to increase what she can offer at the market.

The current schedule in Manchester leaves some months without any farmers' markets. It's possible that a more continuous schedule would prevent people from falling out of the market-going habit. A trade off in a more demanding schedule could be that farmers would need

some time away from the market and move to sales management schedules that reduce the amount of customer interaction.

Sally is particularly interested in expanding the educational component of her market. Other examples of winter farmers' markets are Saratoga, Glenns Falls and Troy.

## **General Goals:**

Conversation touched on 4 general goals for expanding the ways in which Bellows Falls supports area food producers.

### **1.) Better Marketing for the Current Farmers' Market**

Much of the workshop discussion addressed strengthening the current farmers' market through better marketing & advertising. The Farmers' Market Board sets an advertising plan each year, but doesn't have enough staff to do extensive marketing work. A new market manager this year may help. There are likely opportunities for more individuals, organizations, and businesses to get involved with this effort. Particular ideas are listed below.

- Currently planned efforts include: a local foods cooking show on the radio, continuing the education link started last year with Farm-to-School mentors, building on Chamber membership to advertise through local businesses.
- Sometimes businesses can work in employee incentives for going to the farmers market, such as redeemable coupons for the market or slips with paycheck advertising the market.
- Linking local foods with health is a connection that has worked other places. Outlets like the cooking show and school programs are one way to make this connection.
- The bookstore could do a farmer-related window display.
- Better use of the Internet and e-mail lists to advertise.

### **2.) Positioning the Farmers' Market so that Local Businesses Experience it as a Net Positive**

Bellows Falls would like the farmers' market to have an overall positive impact on downtown business. There is interest in discussing how the market affects pedestrian traffic in the downtown and ways that it could increase Friday night activity in *all* areas of Bellows Falls. Downtown businesses and the Farmers' Market Board might sit down together to talk about these topics.

### **3.) Encouraging Local Stores & Restaurants to Carry More Local Food Products**

Boccelli's Café is an example of a downtown business that features local foods. In addition to serving / selling these foods, she plans to have highlights like samplings and displays about the farms. It can take more work to establish connections with local producers. Sharon Boccelli has had to put extra effort into outreach to farmers. Sometimes other organizations can help make these connections. For example, Vital Communities opens its Flavors of the Valley event an hour early for commercial buyers to talk with the food producers featured there.

Stores and restaurants, unlike the Friday farmers' markets, offer a daily outlet for buying local foods. Paul Millman points out that the European shopping style of buying fresh products daily could be attractive to many residents, but Bellows Falls is not currently serving those interests or integrating local foods into that eating style.

Offering local foods through restaurants and stores also expands the ways in which local, non-food businesses can support area farms, by ordering foods that feature local ingredients when they have catering needs (for example at receptions, openings, staff parties, etc.)

#### **4.) Using Food Sales to Promote Bellows Falls as a Market Town for the Region**

An overarching goal is to reposition Bellows Falls as a central Market Town for the surrounding region.





## Food Business Get-Together

Boccelli's on the Canal, 3:00 pm – 5:00 pm

Sunday, July 30th, 2006

**In Attendance:** Hally Andersen, Sharon Boccelli, Tony Elliott, Pat Jeziorski, Helen Labun Jordan, Meg Lucas, Leslie & John Marston, Robert McBride, James Mort, Ivy Rawling, Barbi Schreiber.

**Panelists:** John & Leslie Marston (Leslie's Restaurant in Bellows Falls), Jane Edwards (Julio's in Montpelier), Tristan Toleno (Riverview Café in Brattleboro), Rose Wilson (Harpoon Brewery in Windsor).



On the afternoon of July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2006, a small group of local restaurant owners gathered at the newly opened Boccelli's on the Canal for an informal discussion of marketing strategies. The restaurant scene in Bellows Falls has been growing. These restaurants add to activity in the downtown as well as complementing cultural activities such as performances and art shows. This workshop provided a starting point for those involved in running local restaurants to talk with each other and with experienced restaurant owners / managers about strategies for sustaining a healthy restaurant market in Bellows Falls.

### John and Leslie Marston, owners of Leslie's

#### Restaurant

John & Leslie had never owned a restaurant before when they started Leslie's in 1985. Two important things they learned:

1.) Put in a System of Checks Against a Business Plan. John suggests checking every week against your plans to make sure the restaurant is heading down the right path and to make corrections early on if it's not.

It's important to remember that the "right path" means not only staying in business but also making money. Making money might require rethinking the entire structure of the restaurant (for example cutting out lunches, which he did).

2.) Watch Where Your Work Goes. Small business owners usually end up doing lots of things for themselves that others would contract out. One problem with spreading yourself thin between many chores is that you can't invest in the key parts of making the business successful, like interacting with customers. It's important to identify priorities where you need to invest your time. It's also important to not burn out – some work weeks just aren't sustainable.

John also watches how many meals he serves, cutting off at 20 per hour (or close to that). Trying to do too many meals at once is both stressful and means a lower quality meal.

Other thoughts:

A good magazine is "Restaurant Start Up"

It's hard to find out what to do when you're a new owner. John suggests a more regular get-together with area restaurants to focus on particular points of operations.

## **Jane Edwards - Longtime owner of Julio's in Montpelier**

Jane learned a long list of things about restaurant ownership before she sold Julio's last year (the restaurant is still open in Montpelier).

Don't spend more than you have.

How you present yourself is key, and honesty is key to that presentation. For example, when customers claimed that the food was bad, Jane always admitted it when they were right.

Always keep your hours no matter what – even in a giant snowstorm, even two minutes before closing time – you've promised customers when you'll be open and don't break that promise.

Specials are a good solution for slow nights. Jane used \$2 margaritas to pick up business and it worked. The trick to the special, though, was that she couldn't raise the \$2, even when the price of ingredients went up. But the other money being spent by customers drawn in by cheap margaritas made up the difference.

Staffing is a problem for everyone. Something to keep in mind is your volume of customers per staff person, especially given the difference in business between busy and slow seasons. It's often better to stay in the upper end of high volume than to get slightly larger and have more customers, but fewer customers per staff. This equation makes either small or really big operations easier to manage than medium-sized ones.

Jane did inventory to track money and prevent mishandling as much as possible (it wasn't perfect).

Business planning should happen in the long-term. One good night just means that you had one good night. Plus, there tend to be major swings in how busy a restaurant is, depending on the seasons. Jane kept track of how slow her slow months were and saved enough money when she was busy to carry through that lull. Cultivating a specifically local group of customers can help even out the business' slow spells (see Rose's notes as well).

Tristan notes that the sudden increase in business in summer can also be a problem. He hit serious snags getting food out to customers when Riverview Café opened the deck and were mobbed on Memorial Day weekend. He'll be working with the kitchen to get them ready sooner for handling the summer peak. There's also a senior server who can help make everything run smoothly at that peak. (See Tristan's comments below).

## **Tristan Toleno - Owner of Riverview Café in Brattleboro and VP of the Board for Vermont Fresh Network.**

Riverview Café is bigger than the other restaurants represented: 290 seats in summer.

One of Tristan's major marketing concerns is that he establish his restaurant as unique. He buys local products (about \$150,000 sourced locally) and is part of the Vermont Fresh Network (<http://www.vermontfresh.net>). This purchasing helps situate his restaurant as being Vermont connected. He also makes the point that while chain restaurants get their consistency from the back of a truck, he needs to get his consistency from coordinating a lot of people. A chain diner will be opening near him soon, so he'll see if he's differentiated enough to keep customers coming – including tourists who might just stop at the chains at the exit.

Riverview Café does cross marketing with farmers and at farmers' markets. For example, farmers will sell food at the market labeled "as seen on" the Riverview menu, and similarly he labels farm origins on his restaurant menu. Vermont Fresh Network gives support for building

these relationships. In Bellows Falls, Jim Mort (Fat Franks) is working on his presence at the Farmers' Market.

As with everyone else, finding staff is a problem. Tristan has a young staff, but he's managed to retain many of them for several years so that they get experience. He focuses on training and giving employees opportunities to move up to different jobs.

Tristan had to invest a lot in being seen as part of the community when he first began. Even though he had grown up in the area, people saw him as coming in from NYC (where his most recent job had been). He did constant outreach to local organizations. He also has an advertising budget, which he concentrates more on radio than print media.

## **Rose Wilson - Windsor Main Street Manager and business consultant. Previously Business Development Manager for Harpoon Brewery in Windsor**

The first step in marketing is identifying your point of difference / strength. Ask customers what *they* see as your strength and check if it matches the image you want to project. If it's the same, that's great. If it's different you could adjust your approach to match what others already see as your strength (if you're doing well) or focus on reaching an audience that better matches the type of establishment you want to be.

Almost every restaurant needs to build a strong local base to guard against times when tourist traffic is low. One strategy for this local base is to compile a "friends" list for your business then cater events to those local supporters. For example, Harpoon Brewery worked with the Hanover Inn to do a beer dinner, advertised to the Hanover Inn customer list. The chef developed a menu around 5 Harpoon beers, then he and the brewer spoke to diners about the pairings and the beer. The dinner occurred during a slow time in March and was sold out. Norwich Inn now does the same thing with their brews and uses the dinners to pull in customers who don't always go out for dinner often.

The partnership with Hanover Inn reinforced Harpoon's image for being a high quality beer. Another example of maintaining that image is Harpoon's partnership with King Arthur Flour to develop a custom bread, served at Harpoon. The two companies advertise each other and both are targeting the same sort of audience (ie the type of people who would be interested in seeing how beer is brewed). There are simpler partnerships as well, such as putting your menu out at a business / organization with a similar target audience and putting their brochure in your restaurant.

Rose emphasizes marketing that's directly tied to the experience of the restaurant. Gift certificates are great for this – donating the certificate to organizations shows community commitment while also getting people through the door (and if the certificate holder doesn't walk through the door, you haven't lost any money). Harpoon also invites employees of partner organizations to sampling nights at their restaurant that gets them familiar with the food.

Something like a tasting event at the farmers' market would also get word/ taste out.

Signage is important. This means both having signs to show where you are *and* clearly indicating when you are open / closed. Harpoon has a sandwich board that it puts out and takes



away from the side of the road. Moving the sign away when the restaurant closes changes the scenery and helps continue to catch people's attention (instead of being a sign that's *always* out).

### **Other Comments**

There's a certain amount of loss leader mentality. It's hard to get people to change their habits, so the first step is to simply get them through the door for the first time.

The Gallery Walk in Brattleboro includes a clear guide showing where galleries and restaurants are located. It would be helpful if Bellows Falls did a better job providing maps to visitors and newcomers so that they explore town more easily.

Sharon Boccelli notes that she's establishing a multi-use space (café, specialty foods, deli, etc.) and marketing it as a package. She's had success with getting free press. One challenge she's looking at is ways to keep customers up when the weather gets bad. So far there's a strong local base.

## The Future of “The Island” in Bellows Falls

**Participants:** Monti Barnett, Cathy Bergmann, David Broganer, David Buckley, Ingrid Buckley, Ginger Cook, Mike Cook, Chris Cota, Sean Cota, Ann DiBernardo, John Edwards, Richard Ewald, Tonia Fleming, Rose Fowler, Ellen Howard, Chris Jones, Dennis Ladd, Doug Lamoureux, Luise Light, Robert McBride, Ron MacLachlan, Tom MacPhee, Jill Michaels, Tom Miller, Deb Murphy, Lisa Noe, Stewart Read, Roger Riccio, John Schempf, Scott Selvidio, Chris Sherwin, Jeff Staudinger.

**Resource Team:** Joss Besse (Downtown Program), Andy Broderick (Housing Vermont), Paul Costello (VCRD), Ann Cousins (Preservation Trust of Vermont), Helen Labun Jordan (VCRD), Jeffrey Lewis (Brattleboro Development Credit Corp).



For more information on the Island development discussion please contact Richard Ewald at (802) 463-3456 x110 or [rewald@rockbf.org](mailto:rewald@rockbf.org).

On Tuesday, September 19<sup>th</sup>, a variety of stakeholders, including property owners, tenants, housing and economic developers, municipal employees and interested citizens, gathered to discuss the future of “The Island” in Bellows Falls.

The Island, the area of Bellows Falls bounded by the Connecticut River and the 1792 Bellows Falls Canal, combines natural beauty with a centuries-long history of use by industry, railroads, and tourism. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the plush Island House Hotel thrived not far from the enormous Vermont Farm Machinery factory and active rail yards. Today, tourism, railroads, and industry still co-exist on The Island, while offices, commercial retail, and non-profit arts and community organizations have joined the mix.

The notes below outline a community discussion of potential future developments on the Island.

### Assets and Opportunities

- Many portions of the Island meet the goals set for highest and best use.
- Historically the Island has been an industrial center. The infrastructure of high capacity sewer and water, and 3-phase power, is in place.
- Part of the Island’s history as an industrial center is that it promoted a combination of housing, commercial, and industrial zones in downtown Bellows Falls and contributed to a walkable village.
- The Island is part of the designated downtown for Bellows Falls. Having such a large downtown area is unique, as is having the Island’s type of industrial / commercial mix in the downtown.
- Growth Center programs may create future resources for development.
- The Island is naturally evolving into a mix of different space uses, including industrial and commercial.
- The topography of the Island allows for physical separation of uses even in a small area.

- There could be more parking on the Island, for example where the partially burned TLR building exists today.
- Tourists entering Bellows Falls on buses and trains present a captive audience.
- The Island used to be part of the walking loop maps for Bellows Falls, although it's not included on the most recent reprint.
- Great River Arts Institute has offices, studio space, and a shared lobby area in which to host exhibitions.
- The nearby water, the river and canal, presents an asset.
- The Boston Globe described Bellows Falls as "Where Art Meets Grit". The Island is part of that character.

## Vision for the Island

- A shared vision for the future of the Island recognizes the importance of its current industrial activity and the importance of not detracting from existing downtown activity through negative competition from the Island area.
- The Bridge entering the Island needs to be repaired by New Hampshire.
- In general, the aesthetics at the New Hampshire entry point should be improved.
- Bellows Falls should work on bringing more train passenger traffic into town.
- Amtrak passes through town but doesn't unload luggage (for example bicycles) at Bellows Falls because of the grade difference at the station. This disconnect should be fixed.
- The town has acquired the parking lot off of Bridge Street. It should be improved with lighting, fencing, and well landscaped paths for walking to / around downtown destinations.
- The substation relocation to the Island should include a strong aesthetics consideration that brings the substation to a lower, less visible profile.
- Housing development is expensive and difficult to permit away from existing services, which makes places close to existing infrastructure appealing. There is room for a mixed-use village in the Island, for example near Oh Zone.
- It's unclear what present-day residential value the Island has. A lower population today



reduces real estate values and certain factors, such as the noise made by the power station turbines, could be a nuisance. Plus the Railroad lands are exempt from regulation and can produce noise, nighttime activity and possible gas storage, creating another incompatibility.

- Island buildings need aesthetic improvements. Brattleboro did a successful façade improvement program with private and state funds.
- The Island walking loop should be revived, with an improved streetscape and sidewalks to make walking easier.
- Buildings should have depictions of their historic uses placed on them to add interest / education to the walking loop.
- Industrial heritage should be worked into any cultural tourism projects in Bellows Falls. The old hotel at the Island once made this industrial history / cultural tourism link.



- The Island should be part of the village's overall solution to parking concerns. Future policies should include efforts to promote walking and also consideration of multi-story parking structures to minimize the area of land given up for cars.
- Build a multimodal transportation center.
- Run a cable car from the Island to the top of Fall Mountain.
- The town receives regular requests from people looking for places to locate small businesses – the Island could be an answer to this need.
- A survey exists with maps of the Island and its buildings. A landscape architect should come to work with the community to build a precise vision for how to develop the Island. David Raphael has already done some work on gateway plans.
- Densify within the loop on the western side of the Island for useable space.
- Some buildings on the Island will never be rehabilitated and should be removed.

### **Near-Term Projects**

- Identify vacant, available space for small businesses & entrepreneurs.
- Clean up the streetscape.
- Build on Railroad travel promoting Bellows Falls as a destination. Tie in activities and find ways to bring visitors to the rest of downtown. Get information packets together to be sent to train passengers before they arrive.
- Make the walk from the Island to the square more inviting.
- Fix the Depot Street Bridge.
- Think strategically about how available transportation money could be used.
- Expand the slate of activities that include the Island – the current farmers market and art walks are good, but more should be done.
- Add a crosswalk at Bridge Street.
- Remove trash build up in the canal.
- BFDDA should take on the parking lot project.
- Work with bus services to find out if they have community programs that might contribute busing for visitors coming off the train who aren't able to walk up to the square.
- Update the old walking loops that included the Island.

## **Leaders' Summit, 2006**

On Friday, November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the Creative Communities Program coordinated with Bellows Falls' creative economy organizers Richard Ewald and Robert McBride to host a conference addressing "Strategies for Community Creative Economy Projects". This conference targeted creative economy leaders from around Vermont who wanted to build greater statewide connections and form new ideas about next steps for projects. It brought an enthusiastic, capacity crowd to Boccelli's on the Canal café shortly after the opening of their newly renovated auction hall space.

The morning agenda included an overview of creative economy projects from around the state and a panel on funding options. Afternoon workshops explored the experiences of participants in four common creative economy areas: incubators, arts and downtown revitalization, using natural assets, and town image. Stories came from literally all over the state – from Alburgh to Brattleboro, St. Johnsbury to Rutland. Each afternoon workshop kicked off with a tour of related points in Bellows Falls, including the Waypoint Center, the Island, Great River Arts, the mural, the Exner block, and downtown shops.

The conference took place on the same day as both the Third Friday Bellows Falls gallery walk and a winter farmers' market. Participants who stayed had an opportunity to eat great food, view extraordinary galleries, shop downtown and experience the festive atmosphere of Bellows Falls starting off its the holiday season. All participants received a recently revised guide to the village to use in their explorations. That brochure is available from the Bellows Falls Downtown Development Alliance at <http://www.bellowsfalls.org>.

Summit attendees came from over a dozen towns around the state. The conference's original size cap of 60 participants needed to be expanded to 70 more than a month before the date. Opening remarks came from key political leaders: Rep. Carolyn Partridge, Rep. Michael Obuchowski and Deputy Secretary of the Agency of Commerce and Community Development, James Saudade.



This conference demonstrated a true network of communities engaged in creative economy work.

Amy Dillon, at New Hampshire's Southwest Regional Planning Commission, served as a scribe for the morning sessions. Her notes appear below.

## **Panel of Creative Communities Program Participants**

(Reports from communities are online at: <http://www.vtrural.org>)

The panelists speaking in the morning session offered examples of creative economy work happening in Vermont. There are many communities around the state who have exciting creative economy projects underway – see also the Conference Participants list for other contacts.

### Richard Ewald, Bellows Falls

- Cultivate community pride through the arts.
- “Creative economy is a frame of mind.”
- The Hardhat and the Telephone
  - The hardhat represents bricks and mortar activities. Downtown is a stage set; make sure the scene is set with sidewalks, streetlights, etc.
  - The telephone represents collaboration and communication. How something is accomplished is as important as why it should be accomplished. The key is to establish relationships among the various actors and interests.
- Think of a community’s downtown as a “group improvisation.”
  - Develop working relationships so that people can play off of one another and anticipate one another’s needs and interests.
  - Develop the outline for the scene.
  - Be prepared to identify and involve new leaders/participants.
- We owe it to ourselves and our communities to sustain ourselves as well as our communities.

### Mary Harwood, Lake Champlain Islands

- The Lake Champlain Islands entered the Creative Communities Program as a five town collaborative, comparable to a “chorus.”
- The Islands have just finished the Creative Communities Program process (called WAVES – Waking Vibrant Economic Strategies in the Islands) with action plans for projects being set at the end of October.
- It had been a long time since the towns of the Islands had come together for a common goal, but the effort has managed to involve a diverse cross-section of area residents.
- Through their collaboration, the five towns have realized they are defined by a common sense of place. This sense of place is rooted in the common connection to Lake Champlain.
- 80% of business on the island occurs between May and September and during October’s Apple Fest.
  - Efforts to seek other economic drivers lead to three primary focus areas:
    1. Off-season activities for tourists and residents
    2. Potential facilities for off-season activities
    3. Establish “Trails” of many types (agriculture, paddling, bicycling, etc.)
      - to:
      - a. Keep tourists in the Islands for a longer period of time
      - b. Make locals more aware of their recreational options

### Addy Smith-Reiman, Hardwick

- For a long time, the non-profits of Hardwick had never sat at a table to discuss a common interest and were often competing for resources instead of collaborating. After a

Preservation Trust meeting they took that first step, which led to forming a collective to apply to the Creative Communities Program (among other things).

- A key element to emerge from the process was the realization of the need for better marketing of the community.
- Hardwick adapted the Creative Communities protocol to fit their own vision of the process.
  - They formed an original committee to designate a steering committee.
  - The steering committee then did much of the background work that is usually accomplished through public forums (eg gathering ideas for priority projects, selecting the most supported ideas).
  - There was only one public forum, in May, to set action plans.
- Through the process, Hardwick realized they had historical roots in agriculture and lots of current, local food producers.
- The identification of agriculture as a characteristic of the town facilitated a link with another group whose primary interest was food production, but who desired to tap into the creative economy ideas and processes.
- A product of the Hardwick Creative Communities experience is the “Granite Assets” website. This site includes information on all four Creative Communities Program projects: recreation around Hardwick Lake, downtown beautification (including the potential need for a downtown coordinator or downtown designation), re-utilization of the Centennial Building and supporting the sustainability of the Hardwick Townhouse.

#### Chris Siliski, Rutland

- Rutland has lots going on, but it is in a sense disconnected.
- Rutland suffers (or suffered) from a lack of vision and appreciation for the arts and arts economy.
- The greatest part of the Creative Communities Program so far has been the sustained public participation. Almost 200 people turned out for the first forum.
- Participants have been plentiful and diverse, drawing representatives from many disciplines including artists but also engineers, politicians, and diverse parts of the community.
- The process thus far has been logical and well-managed, creating the base for future actions and catching the ear of local politicians.
- Rutland created four committees exemplifying their diverse definition of creative communities:
  - Open Air Infrastructure
  - Arts Education Center
  - Bike / Recreation Paths
  - Sustainability
- Lessons Learned
  - Communicate
  - Figure out funding beforehand
  - Keeping momentum going is a challenge
  - In an extended process there will be benchmarks to pass, but you need to manage expectations to maintain interest
  - Set up an effective management structure (committees, sub-committees, etc.)

### Ann Lawless, Windsor

- Windsor is the birthplace of Vermont and started machine tool manufacturing in the nation.
- The Creative Communities Program started well for Windsor, with good participation from a cross-section of interests, but continuing that momentum has proven challenging. Participating in the program has not solved past problems of interpersonal conflicts, lack of new leadership (and overextension of old leadership) and ability to retain volunteers on projects.
- Windsor identified three project areas:
  - PR and Marketing - this committee struggled with finding a chairperson, but is now on track with a chair and project plans.
  - Arts Incubator – this committee has met determinedly since its inception, and has constructed a mission statement to lead into its first project.
  - Leadership – this committee is having some participation issues.
- Windsor is currently seeking an overall chairperson to shepherd the process into the future.
- The primary project so far has been assessing the impact of the annual Heritage Days. Diane Konrady, from the VT Dept. of Tourism & Marketing, is helping lead this effort.
- Overall, Windsor is optimistic and making progress.

### Mike Curtis, St. Albans

- There have been “big changes” in St. Albans in recent history, including the addition of new restaurants and other attractions to downtown.
- A lesson learned is that it is important to focus the scale and expectations for one’s efforts on what is appropriate for one’s own community.
- Three projects:
  - Build an Arts Center
    - The St. Albans Artists’ Guild brought numerous arts programs to the table
    - After crafting a list of intended functions and a mission statement, the committee has progressed to a feasibility study and an examination of other arts centers in the state
  - St. Albans Digital Project
    - Bring broadband via fiber to homes and businesses
    - Currently in the process of identifying stake holders and investigating partnerships
  - Downtown/Nighttime Activities
    - Encourage activities in Taylor Park
- All committees meet once a week.
- It is a challenge to get city officials, planning boards, design review boards, etc. on board to understand how the creative economy contributes to economic output.
- Considering creating a technology park downtown in the upper stories of buildings
  - Fiber-optic is a part of this, as is the preservation of local buildings.

### Q&A

Sally Cavanagh from St. Johnsbury updates on their progress:

- Impressed at diversity of attendees for first public forum.
- 1<sup>st</sup> meeting was 2 weeks ago, currently getting ready for 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting.
- See value in the structure provided by the Creative Communities Program.

*Q: Bellows Falls has become known as a poster child of arts based downtown revitalization. How can the arts be sustained if economic & cultural development bring rising property prices?*

A: Richard Ewald: Gentrification is not a success story. Artists have not yet been priced out of Bellows Falls. And the creative economy has provided for diverse strategies that aren't targeted at a particular income range. For the last 10 years the town has had regular brainstorming meetings, such that when it came time to think of the creative economy there were additional ideas in the mix, such as:

- Farmers Market
- The importance and draw of restaurants
- Possibilities for turning the formerly industrial Island to a mixed residential/commercial zone

Bellows Falls has also recognized the opportunity provided by former mills to be resurrected as artist residences and studio space. This has the added benefit of keeping the mill history entwined with the current story of the town.

Prices in Bellows Falls are not yet too high and there is available, affordable space. There has been some progress through subsidized housing to move residents into home-ownership positions.

Robert McBride: The goal is to create a community where people will want to stay as well as where they can afford to stay. Affordable housing issues and awareness are important to making the community accessible. The Arts Organization in Bellows Falls is trying to make a place where artists can live and shop in the stores, etc. The arts also become a part of the "benefits package" for employers in the area by enhancing the quality of life for employees.

Comment from an audience member: Artists see Bellows Falls as welcoming. The creative economy has changed housing conditions, but it has also drawn good people to the area.

Chris Siliski: The key is to see what's already working well, and exploring if those things can be expanded.



*Q: Lots of people come through the interstate past our town and we would like to know how to get them into town. How does one go about getting a sign on the interstate?*

A: Ann: Windsor has a sign on the interstate indicating that it is the birthplace of the state; the drawback is that this sign is not really descriptive enough to tell visitors what they might find in town. Windsor also has a brown, museums and historic sites sign on the interstate, but the exit doesn't lead directly into downtown Windsor where these sites are and there aren't any signs *after* the interstate to send visitors to the right places.



Diane Konrad: The person to contact about state road signage is:

John Kessler  
Agency of Commerce  
Chair of Vermont Agency of Travel Information  
Phone: 828-5202

Q: *What is Rockingham's position on owning the dam?*

A: Richard: The voters declined the option. The numbers seemed to go both ways. A private company acquired the dam and the town is now in discussions to figure out the economics of its operation.

The positive result of the experience has been practice in discussing a difficult issue as a community. The debates were contentious and now people have to take a deep breath and go back to business. It can be a challenge in a small town to have a deeply divided debate and then learn to work together again in civil society.

Q: *Plainfield is a small community but it wants to be a regional center for the creative economy. How do the Islands, as small communities with small downtowns, grapple with nearby large downtowns?*

A: Mary Harwood: We are close to getting a byways designation that officially joins all of our towns.

Ruth Wallman: Being surrounded by water gives the five towns a collective identity. That's unique – at the same time the water alone did not make us always act collaboratively or see ourselves as a larger community.

## **Lunchtime Panel on Funding Creative Economy Projects**

(Contact information for panelists is available at the end of this report)

### Alex Aldrich, VT Arts Council

- The Arts Council has been involved in the creative economy since its identification in the mid 1990s.
- The towns that redeveloped through the creative economy before there was a name for such a thing have become poster children for the process.
- The creative economy can be defined as the conditions that need to exist for there to be a healthy cultural infrastructure.
  - Cultural infrastructure is necessary and self-supporting, but it needs care and feeding of its physical and human assets
- Resources
  - See [www.vermontartscouncil.org](http://www.vermontartscouncil.org)
  - VT Arts Council offers useful information on “Art Mail”
    - Sample information: How to write a grant
      - Spend the most time on what you want to do, then how much it will cost, who are the partners, and of course *why* you want to undertake the project
      - Then describe your organization
      - Be sure to emphasize why people should care, why they should be interested in and excited about your proposal
      - Money flows to good projects
- The leaders in the room have the opportunity to collaborate at the state level and to be a significant voice in advocacy to further the creative economy.
  - Looking to create Creative Economy Fund of 150k from the legislature
  - Needs supporters to sign on, people listening have great potential to reach out to their groups and encourage others to show support for the creative economy as an emerging, important sector of the Vermont economy

### Chuck Ross, Office of Senator Leahy

- Looking to refine communities’ senses of place and character. Looking for vitality and sustainability.
- Where does the money come from?
  - Creative sources for the creative economy
  - Look to state and local as well as federal funds
- Have a vision, know where you’re going and how the pieces might fit together.
- Sen. Leahy’s office has been in projects such as:
  - Lights and sewer in Springfield
  - Montshire Museum in Norwich
  - Granite Museum in Barre
  - Wireless broadband in downtown Montpelier
  - Supporting innovative manufacturing processes and IBM spinoffs
  - Rutland parking garage
  - Road infrastructure in Johnson



The Senator's office cannot fund businesses or restore buildings, but it can support infrastructure and downtown housing options.

2 Ways the Senator's office can fund projects:

- 1) Support your initiatives to federal agencies
- 2) Appropriations process

- a) HUD Special Purpose Monies
- b) Village Revitalization Fund

Timeline: Begin conversations about funding 1 year to 18 months before you want to start the project. The process to get federal funds is lengthy, requiring the collection of requests, the passing of requests to subcommittees, the winnowing process, and then the presentation to the full congress.

Standards of Review (How Leahy Chooses What to Support):

- Firm community investment—includes local interest, money, and time
- Place in the funding line—want to be the middle or last dollars, not the first
- Project is ready for implementation
- Partnerships have been formed
- The project has a business plan
- The project is sustainable—if money is put in this year, will the project still be going 3 years from now?

Contacts: Ted Brady in VT and Jessica Barry in DC (<http://leahy.senate.gov>)

#### Paul Bruhn, Preservation Trust of Vermont

- The Preservation Trust was formed in 1980.
- The Trust aims to support local initiatives.
- The Trust's connection with the creative economy is through downtowns and village centers.
- People want to be in "authentic places."

How the Preservation Trust can Help:

- Website
  - Finding resources—Nancy Brown at the Division for Historic Preservation maintains a comprehensive list of grant opportunities
- Field Service Program—Please see website for contacts
- Funding
  - Seed Grant Program
  - Historic Preservation Projects
  - Village Revitalization Projects



- Partnership with the Freeman Foundation—enables support of community projects

Local support and commitment are essential and make funding a project much easier. The Trust has also helped with some smaller local projects, like sponsoring a bus trip for St. Albans residents to tour creative economy sites around the state.

Need help in legislature

- Tax Credit Program
  - Downtown Village Center Revitalization
    - This fund was out of money after 3 months this year, currently working to raise the cap to 2 million dollars and could use your support

### Max Muise, US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development

Aims to increase the quality of life and economic opportunity

Ways of financing projects:

- Guarantees for bank loans
- Direct finance loans
- Grants
  - Requires median income and population levels, among other criteria

Program areas:

- Rural Business Co-operative Service
- Rural Housing Service
- Rural Utilities Service

The USDA Rural Development (RD) staff is user friendly and willing to help organizations figure out which funding options are right for them.

The local USDA RD jurisdiction is VT and NH.

USDA Rural Development funds bricks and mortar projects, but does not fund operational costs.

Non-profits would access USDA Rural Development through the Community Facility Program. Every community with fewer than 20,000 residents is eligible.

Examples of USDA Rural Development funded projects include:

- VT Rural Development Council's Wi-fi/Broadband Project
- Re-opening of the stage and balcony of a theater in Bellows Falls
- ADA accessible bathroom in Rockingham Town Hall
- Site plan for a micro-loan fund in Springfield
- Town Hall revitalization
- Sewage system rebuild
- On-farm processing equipment and marketing of grass-fed beef
- Consulting grant
- Hardwick Town House and 1860s Opera House

For project areas, think about housing, infrastructure, value-added, distance learning, tele-medicine, etc.

If you call and explain your program to USDA Rural Development they will help you figure out how to apply for funds.

#### Will Belongia, Vermont Community Loan Fund

The Vermont Community Loan Fund is a non-profit organization that borrows from and lends to Vermonters. Its concentration is the business and not the infrastructure. Areas of interest include housing, small businesses, non-profit facilities and operations, and downtown revitalization.

The organization provides debt financing, not grants. Potential projects must therefore either make some revenues or be engaged in a capital campaign with potential to repay the debt. But the Vermont Community Loan Fund is able to come in where a bank cannot because it is able to operate with more creativity and flexibility.

The VT Community Loan Fund operates extensively with the other panel members as well as with partners at the federal, state, and local levels.

Another good source of funding is a community's own revolving loan fund.

#### Q&A

John Mandeville, the area business advisor for the NE Kingdom for the Small Business Center said his organization can work with established and new businesses to help write business plans. Services are available for for-profits and non-profits, and offices are typically hosted by RDCs around the state.

Robert McBride stated that Rockingham Arts and Museum Project (RAMP) and micro-business at Southeast Vermont Community Action (SEVCA) have developed a 13 week business / entrepreneurship class for artists. The longer-term nature of the program allows for relationships to be built among the participants, building community and networks among local artists.

Alex Aldrich offered a handout containing a list of other resources provided by the state.

Mary Niebling adds that VT Women's Business Center Learning Circles are also good resources.

Paul Bruhn clarified that a small grant from his organization would be in the 200-500 dollar range.

Max Muise offered that USDA RD also has small grants for specific entities.

Q: Manchester is about to undergo a 2-year transportation construction project and would appreciate ideas for funding and supporting local businesses through this difficult period. They are particularly thinking of funding that might assist with PR efforts to mitigate some of the effects of the construction.

A: Paul Bruhn: Church St. is an example for how to deal with this problem—they did a good job of communicating with the construction management to make the process fun. The lesson would be to get together to plan for the process.

Max Muise: Talk to the Department of Transportation about possible mitigation funds for affected businesses.

Chuck Ross: Be the squeaky wheel; make a call and build a relationship with the contractor.





# **Vermont Creative Economy Resources**

Prepared by the Vermont Arts Council

## **Vermont Legislature**

2005-2006 Legislative Acts: <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/docs/acts.cfm?Session=2006>

(see especially: Act 43, Sections 16, 34-36)

- ***Historic Preservation Grant Program (Division for Historic Preservation, ACCD)***  
Vermont Division for Historic Preservation has had a 50/50 matching grants program to assist municipalities and non-profit organizations in restoring important historic buildings across the state. Grants of up to \$15,000 are awarded to help preserve and repair buildings that will promote the public's awareness and appreciation of Vermont's cultural heritage. <http://www.dhca.state.vt.us/DHP/financial/hp.html>
- ***Historic Barns Grant Program (Division for Historic Preservation, ACCD)***  
The Vermont Division for Historic Preservation offers a 50/50 matching grants program to assist owners of historic agricultural buildings (barns, corn cribs, sheds, grist mills, etc.) to assist the restoration and repair of these endangered buildings. These may be in private ownership. Grants of up to \$10,000 can be awarded.  
<http://www.dhca.state.vt.us/DHP/financial/barn.html>
- ***Broadband Development Grant Program (ACCD)– information pending***  
<http://www.dca.state.vt.us/>
- ***Human Service Grant Program (BGS)***  
A competitive grant program offering up to \$25,000 support for capital costs associated with major maintenance, renovation or construction of facilities that deliver human services and health care in Vermont communities.  
[http://www.bgs.state.vt.us/pdf/HSGP\\_packet.pdf](http://www.bgs.state.vt.us/pdf/HSGP_packet.pdf)
- ***Recreation and Education Facilities Grant Program (BGS)***  
Offers competitive grants of up to \$25,000 to stimulate the creation and development of recreational and educational opportunities in Vermont communities.  
<http://www.bgs.state.vt.us/pdf/Rec-Ed-Facilities-Grant-Program.pdf>
- ***Cultural Facilities Grant Program (Vermont Arts Council)***  
The purpose of this grant program is to assist Vermont nonprofit organizations and municipalities to enhance, create or expand the capacity of an existing building to provide cultural activities for the public.  
<http://www.vermontartscouncil.org/Default.aspx?tabid=217>

## **Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development**

Ancient Roads and Mapping Grants -- The Ancient Roads Research and Mapping Grant program was established in Act 178 of the 2002 Vermont General Assembly to make grant funds available for the purpose of researching and mapping town highways, trails and unidentified corridors. All Vermont municipalities are eligible to apply. A maximum of \$5,000 (that can be spent over a period of two years) is available to each grantee.

<http://www.dhca.state.vt.us/Planning/AncientRoadsGrantProgram.htm>

Municipal Education Grant Program – The Municipal Education Grant program (MEG) provides municipalities with up to \$800 for training volunteer boards and commissions to help them perform their duties as defined under 24 V.S.A. Chapter 117. The fund is designed to bring trainers directly to the community so that all members of the land use boards and commissions have the opportunity for basic and on-going education.

<http://www.dhca.state.vt.us/Planning/MEG.htm>

**Municipal Planning Grants** – The Municipal Planning Grant Program is designed to support Vermont towns in their municipal planning efforts. The program provides \$15,000 (single)/\$25,000 (consortium) grant funds for technical assistance for town planning, implementation of plans and ordinances, encouragement of citizen participation and education, and innovative demonstration planning projects. Planning grants have been awarded for projects such as rewriting town plans, updating zoning bylaws, and GIS updates.

<http://www.dhca.state.vt.us/Planning/MPG.htm>

**Vermont Community Development Grants**--The VCDP is funded by federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds that are administered by the State. Funded activities must meet at least one national objective (benefit persons of low and moderate income households; aid in the prevention and elimination of slums and blight; or meet community development needs of a particular urgency) and at least one state objective (conserve, expand, and improve housing; create and retain employment; or improve public facilities in support of housing or economic development activities, or where there is a threat to public health and safety).

<http://www.dhca.state.vt.us/VCDP/index.htm>

**Vermont Dept. of Tourism and Marketing**-- The Fund for Tourism Marketing Initiatives (FTMI) provides a total of \$100k in matching grants to help organizations and businesses build or expand events, marketing programs, advertising campaigns and public relations programs

[http://www.vermontpartners.org/html/marketingvt\\_ftmi.asp](http://www.vermontpartners.org/html/marketingvt_ftmi.asp)

## **Preservation Trust of Vermont**

[http://www.ptvermont.org/funding\\_for\\_historic\\_preservation.htm](http://www.ptvermont.org/funding_for_historic_preservation.htm)

**Preservation Grants** -- Preservation Grants are available to non-profit organizations for rehabilitating historic buildings. These grants have helped local groups save and use a variety of special places, from the Haskell Opera House in Derby Line to the Vermont Arts Exchange in North Bennington

**Project Development Grants** -- Up to \$500 seed funding for project planning and development (Sincerbeaux Fund)

## **Vermont Arts Council**

<http://www.vermontartscouncil.org/Grants/ForOrganizations/tabid/173/Default.aspx>

**Presentation Grants** – Project support for Community Organizations, up to \$7,500 dollars

**Local Arts Partnership Grants** – Planning and Implementation grants up to \$10,000 and up to two years for operations that encourage local collaborations

**Technical Assistance Grants** – Up to \$500 for planning, facilitation

## **Vermont Humanities Council**

[http://www.vermonthumanities.org/index\\_files/humanitiesgrants.htm](http://www.vermonthumanities.org/index_files/humanitiesgrants.htm)

The Council provides up to \$7,500 for public humanities programs that contribute to the achievement of its mission.

## **Vermont Community Foundation** <http://www.vermontcf.org/guide-grantseekers.html>

The VCF is a family of more than 550 distinct charitable funds, each with its own name and purpose. These funds have been established by individuals, families and organizations as a way of providing charitable support to enhance the quality of life in Vermont. The assets in these funds are pooled together and invested by the VCF, with a portion of the investment income made available for grants on an annual basis.

**Orton Family Foundation** <http://www.orton.org/>

Technical support and planning tools. No monetary grants.

**Freeman Foundation** <http://foundationcenter.org/cgi-bin/ffindershow.cgi?id=FREE013>

Primarily supports preservation of open lands; Asian programs and projects; occasional support for education/library activities.

**Jesse Cox Charitable Trust** <http://www.hemenwaybarnes.com/selectsrv/jbcox/cox.html>

**Jane's Trust** <http://www.hembar.com/selectsrv/janes/>

**Tourism Cares** <http://www.tourismcares.org/>

Awards charitable grants through its Worldwide Grant Program to worthy tourism-related nonprofit organizations worldwide for capital improvements as well as education programs in conservation and preservation.

**USDA Rural Development – Vermont and New Hampshire**

<http://www.ururdev.usda.gov/>

- ***Business and Cooperative Programs*** Programs include Business and Industry Guaranteed Loans, RBEGrants, RBOGrants, Intermediary Relending Program Loans, Value-added Agricultural Product Marketing Grants, and Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Grants. <http://www.ururdev.usda.gov/rbs/index.html>
- ***Rural Broadband Access Loans and Guarantees*** For construction, acquisition of facilities and equipment for the provision of broadband services in eligible communities. <http://www.ururdev.usda.gov/rus/index.html>
- ***Housing Programs*** Too many programs to describe. <http://ururdev.usda.gov/rhs/index.html>
- ***Community Facilities*** For essential (emergency, etc.) facilities. <http://ururdev.usda.gov/rhs/index.html>
- ***Utility Programs*** Programs include Water and Waste Disposal Loans, Loan Guarantees, Grants; Solid Waste Management Grants, and Distance Learning and Telemedicine Loans/Grants. <http://ururdev.usda.gov/rus/index.html>

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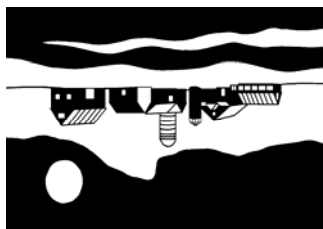
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