

Leaders' Summit, 2006

On Friday, November 17th, 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.
- 1st meeting was 2 weeks ago, currently getting ready for 2nd 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 Konrady: 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
 - 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: example for how problem—they did communicating construction make the process would be to get the process.



Church St. is an to deal with this a good job of with the management to fun. The lesson together to plan for

Max Muise: Talk of Transportation mitigation funds businesses.

to the Department about possible for affected

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