

The Creative Economy In Vermont Today

Advancing Vermont's Creative Economy generated an immediate and enthusiastic response across the state. The proposed strategies were seen as important elements for rural development and the subject of numerous legislative committee hearings, as well as discussions in chambers of commerce, downtown groups and selectboards throughout the state. Senate and House members, as well as Governor Douglas, introduced bills that echoed the ideas put forward in the report. The language that established the Commission on the Future of Economic Development in Vermont specifically included references to the creative economy. Editorials and radio commentators praised the concepts as right for Vermont, right now.

The report recognized some of the communities around the state already seeing revitalization and renewal through creative economy efforts. In Bellows Falls for example, a dying downtown was turned around—first by a theater company raising funds to renovate Town Hall, and soon after by a community mural project and the transformation of a derelict downtown block into affordable live-work space for artists.

Since then, creative leaders in Bellows Falls have forged public and private partnerships to take historic preservation around the square and along the river, and have built music and cultural programs to turn the village into a regional market center. Gallery spaces, new restaurants, hardware and other specialty shops, and an authentic Main Street not only attract visitors but local residents looking for interaction with their neighbors. The town's revitalized life has attracted entrepreneurs who have launched



Bellows Falls

Setting the Stage

successful, sustainable, and growing businesses such as SoVerNet, a statewide internet service provider, and Chroma Technology, a leading manufacturer of optical products.

In Vergennes, “Vermont’s smallest city”, the early 1990s witnessed empty storefronts, deteriorating buildings, and a steady stream of unsuccessful businesses. However, an unflappable community-based volunteer effort pieced together donated supplies, matching grants, and discounted services to reclaim its Opera House from the pigeons and reopen it to host a wide variety of community and cultural events. Within a few years local Vergennes investors had rehabbed several downtown buildings. Today, stores are full, award-winning restaurants are well established, and the Opera House serves as the civic center of this re-energized city.

Burlington, Vermont’s largest city, is truly set apart from urban centers with comparable or even larger populations by the quality and diversity of its cultural offerings. From the beautifully renovated Firehouse Gallery of Visual Arts and the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts downtown to the classic Fleming Museum on UVM’s campus, Burlington hosts world class artists and performers. Equally important, its galleries, bars, and coffeehouses provide venues for local talent to build audiences and exchange creative ideas. This creative climate continues to thrive, expanding to the South End businesses reshaping former industrial spaces and the North End, where artists and other emerging businesses are finding affordable space and a growing multicultural diversity to be the right ingredients for their ideas to blossom.



Flynn Center, Burlington

Vermont's story of the creative economy is led by town centers, but the nature of settlement in the state adds some distinct features to this economic sector and its role in community development. Vermont is home to artists, writers and artisans, designers and software developers, inventors and small-scale entrepreneurs—at business, at home, in the hills and valleys throughout the state. For Vermont, the creative economy movement celebrates this dispersed and diverse population as an essential part of the state's rural character, culture and commerce.

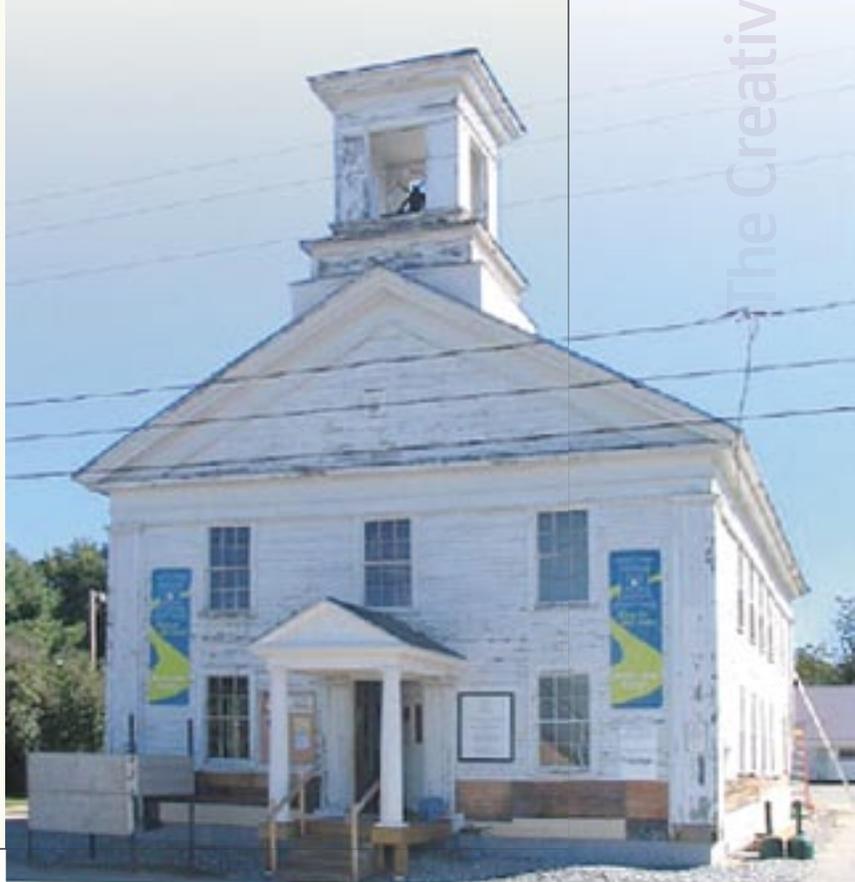
Throughout the state, Brattleboro, Morrisville, Troy, Newport, Bradford, Weston, Stowe, Milton, Enosburg and so many other small communities are advancing creative economy related efforts. Exciting performance spaces, innovative arts/business collaborations, and fresh strategies are emerging. Artists, artisans, and other creative thinkers are participating in community development conversations and adding a fresh perspective. Projects ranging from business incubators to cooperative art galleries are shining elements in local commerce and development, and parts of a statewide movement.

Brandon is a great example. Led by renowned local artist Warren Kimble, the arts community there stepped up to lend leadership to downtown projects, including the development of a new pocket park and new restaurants. Through cooperation they expanded public art and commercial exhibition space. They made news with pigs—ubiquitous fiberglass pigs painted in myriad colors and styles. First it was funny, but soon Vermont was abuzz at the pigs—what did they mean? What did this phenomenon say about Brandon? From being a bedroom town on the decline, Brandon came to be seen as a creative place with a funky, colorful side... a town worth watching. Subsequent artist collaborations and events built further momentum. Storefronts filled,



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River Arts is transforming the former Lamoille Grange into a new arts center in Morrisville.



Setting the Stage

and today Brandon is a successful town on the move and a leader in community development in VT.

Clearly, the key ideas that have come together under the ‘creative economy’ umbrella have been germinating around the state for several years. Once the term came into wide use, following the release of the VCCI report, towns and cities across the state started asking, “How can we deliberately foster creative economy enterprises? How can we strategically advance our assets as a ‘center of culture and innovation?’”

The Vermont Council on Rural Development sought ways to help more Vermont towns and regions tap their potential creative development. Following up on one of the VCCI recommendations, it worked with members of that group to outline a plan for a Creative Communities Program. With major support from Jane’s Trust, VCRD launched the program in the fall of 2005.



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Thistle Hill Pottery

