



Vermont Community Leadership Guide

Community Leadership in Action



**A Vermont Guide to
Community Engagement
Project Development
and Resources**

The Vermont Council on Rural Development helps people build prosperous and resilient communities through democratic engagement, mobilizing resources, and collective action.



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Vermont Community Leadership Guide

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Table of Contents

Introduction & Acknowledgements1

Tools for Community Leaders5

Framing a Process for Public Engagement.....	6
Inviting the Public: Practical Tips.....	9
Including Diverse Leadership and Participation in Community Processes	13
Communicating with the Community	15
Developing A Community Vision.....	18
Setting Priorities for Action	21
Managing Effective Meetings	27
Dealing with Disagreement	30
Facilitating in Demanding Moments.....	33
Using Online, Hybrid, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Other Digital Technologies	36
Fostering Strong Municipal-Community Partnerships	40
Principles of Project Management	42
Budgeting and Fundraising.....	44
Community Engagement Resources	48

Advancing Community Projects53

Community and Natural Spaces

Advance Outdoor Recreation and Trails.....	55
Build a Community Park or Green Space	60
Create Community Gathering Spaces	65
Improve Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility.....	71
Increase Lake & River Stewardship and Access	76

Economic and Community Vitality

Revitalize Your Downtown or Village Center	83
Support Your Local Economy and Businesses	88
Develop a Community Trust	93
Develop an Agricultural Network	97
Boost the Arts and the Creative Economy.....	103
Market Your Community to Visitors.....	107

Community Infrastructure

Improve and Develop Housing	111
Revitalize Community and Historic Buildings	117
Advance Village Wastewater Infrastructure.....	123
Expand Local Internet Connectivity	127

Community Connections & Civic Engagement

Expand and Improve Community Communications	132
Develop Events that Strengthen Community.....	136
Welcoming New Residents to Your Community	142
Increasing Civic Engagement and Municipal Capacity	146

Youth, Families, and Wellbeing

Engaging Youth: A Key to Community Vitality.....	153
Build a School and Community Partnership	160
Engaging with Anchor Institutions in Your Community.....	164
Address Childcare Needs in Your Community	168
Address Substance Use in Your Community	174

Climate & Emergency Resilience

Create Local Climate and Energy Action	179
Community Climate Resilience	187

Additional Resources 193

Vermont Leadership Programs	194
Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Definitions	196

Introduction

Welcome! We hope this updated version of the guide will be useful to you in your work for the good of your community.

Since we first wrote this guide in 2020–21, much has changed. The COVID-19 pandemic has ended, Vermont has experienced devastating floods and droughts, our housing problem has become a crisis, and people are struggling to make ends meet. Across rural Vermont, many communities are also experiencing a sense of loss: the loss of schools and local businesses, population and jobs, and sometimes a sense of control over what happens in the places we call home. At the same time, the future can feel increasingly uncertain.

And yet, Vermonters continue to come forward with creative solutions, support and care for one another, and a steadfast belief in the future of their communities. In the face of so much change and uncertainty, the willingness of people to step forward, give their time, bring people together, and work for the good of their communities is remarkable. In these pages, you will find some of their success stories. We hope you find them inspirational and informative, and that they remind you of what is possible when people come together.

What is leadership? How do we define it? In a democracy, leadership is a process: the act of stepping up for your community, listening to others, bringing priorities together, and working with people to make things happen. Leadership can mean serving on a town board, organizing a community event, helping your neighbors, speaking up about an issue you care about, or simply asking, “What can I do to help?” For us at the Vermont Council on Rural Development, leadership is not about titles or promoting certain people. It is about supporting anyone who is willing to step forward in service to their community.

We believe local leadership is one of the most important ingredients for building connection, setting direction, and making progress in the face of the economic, demographic, and social changes confronting Vermont. There is much we cannot control about the forces shaping our communities, but we can choose how we respond. We can listen to one another, build relationships, make room for new ideas and new people, and work together to shape the future of the places we love. Much of this leadership happens because volunteers are willing to give their time, energy, ideas, and care to their communities.

In every community across the state, Vermonters of all ages, backgrounds, and circumstances are stepping up. Even in times of relative peace and quiet, hardworking local officials, volunteers, and informal leaders are vital to the fabric of our communities. When towns and regions come together to listen, set priorities, and take action, new leaders often emerge with transformative ideas and energy to help their communities rise to meet their challenges.

This kind of leadership is not about pretending that change is easy or that every challenge can be solved. It is about facing change together, grounded in a love for our communities and for one another. It is about recognizing what we can influence, finding opportunities in the midst of uncertainty, and continuing to build the connections and relationships that make communities strong.

This guide is a living document, grounded in the practice of community leadership, which is always growing and changing. New challenges and opportunities will continue to arise, and the guide you are reading today will no doubt need to be updated again. At the Vermont Council on Rural Development, we will continue to listen to the needs of rural communities, connect people and communities to the resources they need to advance their locally defined priorities, and learn alongside you. If you find something useful in this guide, please use it and share it widely. And if you find something missing, please reach out to us at info@vtrural.org.

In a democracy, we shape our communities together: through the relationships we build and the ways we show up for one another. You do not need a title, special expertise, or a formal role to make a difference in your community. Where people step up, towns can achieve great things. Motivated by a deep love of place, local leaders in all their diversity are building relationships, creating momentum, solving problems, and making democracy real in communities across Vermont.

Today, perhaps as much as any time in our recent history, Vermonters are working together to respond to crises, strengthen the foundations of our communities, and build a resilient future for our state. We believe deeply in the power of that work. When so much around us is changing, choosing to care for one another and to invest in the future of our communities is itself an act of leadership.

At VCRD, we are honored to be part of this work with you.

Acknowledgements

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And finally, to all readers—Vermont's rural leaders—you are the inspiration behind this Guide.

About the Guide

This “Community Leadership in Action” guide is a practical starting point for anyone working to strengthen their town. It offers tips, strategies, and tools that help new, emerging, and veteran leaders frame local issues, bring people together, and move projects forward. The first section offers a number of **Tools for Leaders** to support leaders in bringing people together, running effective and efficient meetings, communicating with the public, dealing with conflict, welcoming diversity, setting action priorities, and strengthening other key skills.

The second section, **Advancing Community Projects**, shares action ideas for specific topics drawn from 20 years of VCRD Community Visits. These chapters compile the recommendations and priorities identified by scores of Vermont communities paired with guidance from resource providers and community and economic development experts. The action steps reflect what thousands of Vermonters have worked to advance in their communities—strategies shaped by lived experience and local leadership.

Each community project chapter offers a strategic framework for getting started and a curated list of resources—experts, funders, and partners—who can help to further local projects. Nobody knows the intricacies and particular issues facing a community better than its residents, and we encourage local folks to grab the reins and use or adapt these tools to fit their needs.

Throughout the guide, you’ll find examples from towns across Vermont and resource lists organized at the organizational level, recognizing that programs, funding, and personnel change over time. More detailed information is available at vtrural.org/Guide, and if you’re looking for a warm connection to someone at any of these organizations, VCRD can be reached at info@vtrural.org and can in most cases facilitate that connection.

The work of community and economic reinvention is never done, and effective leaders are constantly adapting and growing to match the needs of the day. To support leaders statewide, VCRD created the Vermont Community Leadership Network (vtrural.org/leadership-network), a backbone for new, emerging, and longtime leaders who want to build skills, provide peer support, engage in ongoing learning, and enlist their communities for recovery, renewal and resilience. The network offers online gatherings, training, peer support, and learning teams focused on key themes and project areas. We invite all who are committed to advancing their communities to join, participate, and stay connected. Sign up today to keep in touch!

Thank you for the work you are doing—and the work you are preparing to do—for your community. We are here to support you, celebrate your successes, and help you navigate challenges along the way. From all of us at VCRD, thank you for being on the line for your community, and helping us all move towards a vital and resilient future!

I. Tools for Community Leaders

Community leadership begins with the ability to bring people together: early, openly, and with deep respect for the diversity of experiences in every town. This section offers a starting point for the core skills that make inclusive engagement possible: communicating clearly about purpose, inviting broad participation, listening with intention, and designing processes that welcome all voices. As the guide notes, “public engagement is rarely one event; it’s often a series of strategies,” and effective leaders cultivate the tools to navigate that ongoing cycle. These practices form the foundation for every successful community initiative, and the resource index at the end of this section can help you continue developing them.

At VCRD, we believe leaders are not defined by titles and formal authority. Leadership grows from caring about one another and the future of our communities. Every person has the capacity to lead in ways that strengthen connection, belonging, and shared purpose. We hope you find these skills useful as you work toward your community vision!

Framing a Process for Public Engagement

Knowing how to encourage community involvement is a key leadership skill. Whether you're addressing a small neighborhood issue or creating a town-wide ten-year plan, strong participation tends to share key traits. Here are some of the critical elements to consider in framing your process.

Choose the most productive time and circumstances for engagement.

When will public engagement prove most valuable, both to leaders and participants? Your project is especially likely to attract broad participation if *one or more* of these qualities apply:

It's early in the process. Setting goals, brainstorming ideas, choosing priorities, and other efforts that happen early in a project offer excellent opportunities for participation. People are likely to get frustrated if they're asked their opinion when it's too late to make a difference.

The project will affect many. How large is the group of people affected by your project, or who can have an impact on it? If it's a big or diverse group—or if you're still determining who will be affected—it makes sense to have an interactive process to consult these potentially interested parties.

The project is complex or controversial. Effective public engagement will help people grapple with values-based decisions, understand issues more fully, and comprehend necessary trade-offs. The project will benefit from the wide range of perspectives brought to light through a participatory process, which in turn will help generate valuable public ownership.

Power has not been balanced. Public engagement is especially important when some groups have felt left out of previous decisions. You can improve trust by being open and transparent about the democratic process and clearly communicating when and how people can most effectively take part in decision making.

There's no community consensus. If the public has suspicion or concerns about your topic, or is simply not well informed, a well-structured engagement process can help. Working together, communities can agree on a course of action and move forward.

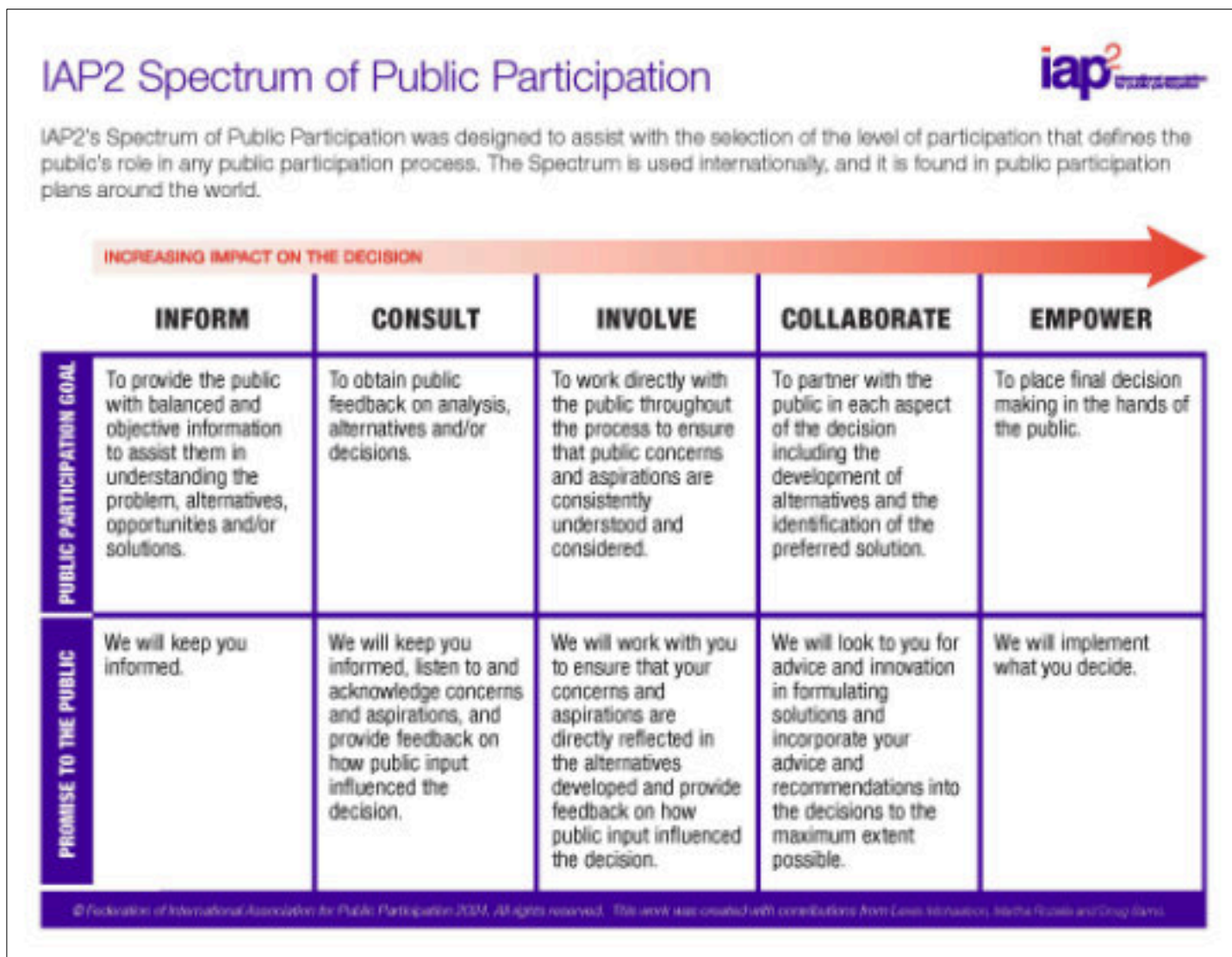
Know and communicate what you're asking the public for.

Some meetings are for sharing information; others for brainstorming; and still others for making decisions about action. It is essential to know and share the purpose and boundaries of decision-making up front. Be able to describe your goal—*why* do you want public participation now? Then choose engagement tools that match your goal.

People get frustrated when they expect one thing but experience another. For instance, tempers flare if people come to a meeting to express their views but discover it's an informational meeting with no public comment time. Likewise, people get annoyed if

they come expecting information, but the meeting is designed to gather ideas and no one is available to answer questions. In both cases, participants would have been more satisfied if they had understood the purpose of the meeting before they came.

Public engagement is rarely one event; it's often a series of strategies. Each of the following goals is appropriate at different points in a community's process. Consider which one(s) are best for you, then choose the best tools.



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Be realistic about your capacity.

Many public engagement techniques require facilitated public meetings. Be sure your local leadership has the facilitation skills necessary (see "Dealing with Disagreement" and "Facilitating in Demanding Moments"), or that they get training (see "Community Engagement Resources"). Sometimes, especially on controversial topics, even skilled local facilitators have too much investment or perceived influence in a topic; in these circumstances, it might be advisable to hire a professional facilitator.

Can you ensure you're welcoming the whole community? Is your meeting place fully accessible? Can you offer childcare? Are there language translation, transportation, timing, or other issues you can address to make your process open to all? (See "Including Diverse Leadership and Participation in Community Processes," and "Community Engagement Resources").

Include everyone.

Do your homework to identify people who might be affected by your project and include them all. Be sure to include people who have power or resources that could help your project, people with insights and lived experience related to your project, people who may need what your project has to offer, and those who may have been left out of related conversations in the past. Problem solving works better with a variety of perspectives, so include even those who might not support your project (see "Inviting the Public").

Invite people into your planning early. Ideally, even your first planning meeting will be a mini version of the diverse representation you hope to achieve. You don't have to have the full plan in place before you invite participation. In fact, people are more likely to support and endorse this engagement process if they have had a hand in shaping it.

Communicate early, often, and openly about your efforts.

If you are an elected or officially appointed committee, abide by the Vermont Open Meeting Law requirements on making agendas and minutes available, etc. (Consult your town office, or see "Community Engagement Resources"). Informal groups may not be required to follow the same guidelines, but public engagement is more likely to succeed if you are consistently transparent in your organizing (see "Communicating with the Community").

Listen, respect, and learn.

Leaders are sometimes tempted to skip the work of inclusive engagement. Why invite people who might not like your ideas or want to change your project? The reason is because they can add to your ideas, bring fresh perspectives, and help build mutual ownership for a broader initiative and greater momentum. Furthermore, they are likely to show up eventually. If people have not been included early, they are more likely to participate later with distrust, disruption, or opposition.

The secret ingredient in any public engagement is deep listening. Your success comes from your honesty, your authenticity, and the heart that you bring to drawing all voices together. Listening and modeling deep attention provides a foundation for mutual power, and a cornerstone for success in whatever project or issue is to be addressed.

Inviting the Public: Practical Tips

Inviting the public to take part in a process begins earlier than you might think. In fact, it's ideal to invite the community to take part in designing the process itself! This helps ensure that your efforts will appeal to a wide variety of folks. Here are a few tips for welcoming public participation.

Lead with a diverse team.

People will be more attracted to projects when they can “see” themselves represented among the organizers. Work to assemble a leadership/outreach team that's as diverse as your community. Some towns choose to create co-chair positions to make sure a project isn't perceived as led by a particular faction.

Are we all here?

At your first organizational meeting, look around the room and inquire of the group: “Are we all here?” With the idea that you'd like your group's efforts to represent the community as well as possible, identify who may be missing or under-represented and brainstorm how you can fill out your ranks. Repeat this exercise at multiple meetings throughout your planning process and give yourselves credit for growing inclusivity. (See “Including Diverse Leadership and Participation in Community Processes,” and “Community Engagement Resources.”. Areas needing balance might include:

- Gender identity and expression
- Race and ethnicity
- Age groups (youth, young adults, middle-aged, seniors)
- LGBTQ+ community
- Family structures (married, single, non-parents, new parents, parents with school-age children)
- Religious and spiritual groups
- People with disabilities (visible and invisible)
- Neurodivergent individuals
- Geographic diversity (different neighborhoods or parts of town)
- Long-time residents and newcomers
- Housing status (homeowners, renters, people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity)
- Immigrant and refugee communities
- Local businesses and entrepreneurs
- Occupational diversity (farmers, foresters, loggers, skilled tradespeople, service workers, gig and shift workers, office workers, etc.)
- Artists, craftspeople, and creatives
- Hunting, fishing, and sporting communities
- Civic groups, local clubs, and non-profits
- Schools (staff, teachers, students, administration)
- Elected and appointed local officials and municipal staff
- Levels of civic engagement (highly engaged and less involved)
- Digital access (varying levels of computer/internet access and literacy)
- Socioeconomic backgrounds

Focus on accessibility.

Nearly one in four Vermont adults lives with at least one disability, whether temporary or permanent. You can help welcome everyone's engagement by planning ahead. Be sure all meetings and events are held in accessible locations (including parking, restrooms, and room set-up). Check acoustics and arrange for audio and visual equipment that will allow all to participate fully. Confirm that presenters and materials can be easily seen and heard. Review your materials (print and online) to be sure they are in plain, jargon-free language. Make sure materials have high contrast between text and background and comply with accessibility standards. Event publicity should note how residents can request reasonable accommodations. See "Community Engagement Resources."

Consider barriers to participation.

Put yourself in the shoes of the individuals or groups you hope to include, and think through the obstacles that might limit their involvement. Barriers may stem from lack of information, transportation, childcare, timing, or historic patterns of marginalization. Identify existing networks and connect with local leaders who are trusted by those you want to reach. Strong relationships make it easier to understand what people need and identify practical ways to reduce or remove systemic barriers.

Plan specific outreach.

If you have identified groups that are not yet active in your process, make a concrete plan to reach them. Go around the circle and ask for volunteers: "Who knows someone (from this part of town/on that board/in the arts community...) who you can ask to be involved?" Check progress at the next meeting. If no one in the group knows anyone from a missing perspective, that's a good clue that it's time to build a new relationship. Consider making respectful cold calls or asking a regional organization to help connect you with local contacts (for artists, for example, you could ask the VT Arts Council Creative Zone coordinator).

Make a personal invitation but avoid "token"-izing.

When inviting individuals, share what you know about interests or perspectives they might be able to bring to the conversation. For example, "This project could really benefit from the perspective of a young parent balancing childcare and work." Unless they are the elected spokesperson for an organization, don't ask anyone to speak for "their group" (e.g. don't expect one youth member to know what all kids want). Try to get broad enough participation that no one is put on the spot.

Be clear what you're asking.

People need to know what you're asking them to commit to. If you're publicizing one event, give the date, time, location, and purpose. If it's a longer process, briefly describe the timeline and goal (for instance, a three-month planning process with two meetings per month, ending in a November vote). See "Framing a Process for Public Engagement."

Use multiple modes of communication.

Not everyone uses the same news source. Also, folks need to hear things several times for it to stick (see “Communicating with the Community”). Use a mix of tools. Here are some examples:

- Staff a table at community events (local meetings, concerts, sports events)
- Put up posters on bulletin boards (school, town hall, store, post office, cafe)
- Place handouts on the counter of local gathering spots
- Put up a sandwich board in higher-traffic intersections
- Get on the agenda of local boards/committees to keep them updated
- Share your message with existing groups (book group, sporting clubs, immigrant/refugee organization)
- Host an online or hybrid interactive event to highlight your project
- Create your own project website
- Mail postcards or flyer to all households
- Create a survey (use both print and online)
- Take advantage of word of mouth – who are the best sources of juicy news in your town?
- Host a local focus group with stipends available for participation
- Access existing media, such as:
 - Town website
 - Front Porch Forum
 - Facebook or other social media
 - School newsletters, and/or special flyers sent home with students
 - Church and club newsletters
 - Local newspaper
 - Commentaries or letters to the editor
 - Local radio and TV stations
 - Public Access TV

Enlist community talent.

Whenever possible, hire local businesses and professionals. In addition, volunteers may be willing to contribute their talents toward your outreach, including photographers, graphic designers, artists, or web specialists. Teachers may be interested in taking advantage of your topic as an educational opportunity – for instance, hosting a poster contest, or asking students to envision your town’s future regarding your topic area. Consider interviewing retirees about their memories on the topic you’re working on. People will be interested in seeing their neighbors’ talents and ideas, helping to build interest and momentum.

Mix it up.

Not everything has to happen at a 7:00 pm Tuesday meeting. Consider field trips, family-friendly events, online and hybrid events, and other diverse options to make sure all feel

welcome and included. People from different backgrounds and cultures communicate differently; some people will be able to express themselves best through small-group opportunities, visual presentations and hands-on opportunities, or via creative events such as storytelling or the arts.

Say thank you.

Appreciation can be shown in many ways. Offering stipends, gift cards, and other honoraria can help engage community members who cannot offer volunteer labor. You might provide food at meetings, acknowledge efforts at meetings or in group communications, or celebrate milestones and successes. People are more likely to get involved and stay involved if they know their contribution is appreciated. Recognize and praise civic commitment, volunteerism, and local democratic participation to encourage and strengthen the community.



Including Diverse Leadership and Participation in Community Processes

The authentic involvement of everyone affected by community decisions is essential to meaningful progress. When people are invited, engaged, and empowered to shape local processes, communities build deeper understanding, trust, and shared commitment. Broad ownership fuels creativity, strengthens community power, and supports lasting outcomes. Centering diversity, equity, and inclusion is crucial to ensuring that this work is both impactful and enduring.

Equity isn't just the absence of discrimination; it's the presence of systems and strategies that help all people thrive. Vermont's diversity is evolving, and our economic future depends on meeting the needs of a growing multicultural marketplace. Welcoming visitors, entrepreneurs, and new residents from diverse backgrounds strengthens our communities and expands opportunity. How we include and support our new neighbors will be central to sustaining Vermont's social and economic vitality in the years ahead. To see full definitions of diversity, equity and inclusion see p.196.

Guiding Questions to Help Encourage Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

Encouraging diversity, equity and inclusion requires us to continually ask sometimes difficult questions of ourselves and our working groups, and perpetually reevaluate opportunities for new input, direction and leadership. The following is by no means a comprehensive list but is a starting point to help guide local efforts to include a broad range of individuals and perspectives. If you're interested in a more structured impact-assessment tool to help guide your planning, specifically when it comes to equity efforts, you can find it on the Office of Racial Equity's website: racialequity.vermont.gov/.

- **What is the makeup of our group** with respect to the following categories: income, geography, education, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, political affiliation, faith, occupation, physical ability, criminal history, native language, and more?
- **Who will be impacted by the issue that your initiative or project is working to address?** Who will be affected by the outcome of your work? How might that impact or experience be felt differently by people of different incomes, race, ethnicity, geography?
- **Are there individuals who could be invited into the process to help broaden the group's perspective?** How can the structure or timeline of the process change to incorporate more meaningful involvement for all?
- **What accommodations might the group need to make to allow participation from a broader array of local community members?** Are there implicit biases in the way the group operates that favor some people over others?
- **Who ultimately makes the decisions for the group?** Are there ways to distribute power across all members? Is the input of everyone within the group being valued equally?
- **How is the group gathering input from the broader community about its action and direction?** Are there populations that have not been consulted? What would need to be done to engage them?

- **If successful, will the initiative benefit all members of the community equally?** If not, why is it important to serve a particular group?
- **What challenges to inclusion and trust exist on your team or in your community that may be barriers to authentic community involvement?** How can you build relationships of trust and respond by offering deeper engagement?
- **Are there lessons to be learned from similar initiatives in the past?** How can our shared history inform our vision for the future?

Considerations for Language Access.

Language access in rural Vermont requires planning for multilingual and accessible language participation from the outset – identifying local language needs, using plain-language materials written at the 5th-8th grade level, and partnering with trusted institutions like schools, libraries, employers, or health clinics to reach residents who may not engage through English-only outreach. Effective planning means asking who might be excluded, what interpretation formats are feasible given your local constraints, and how facilitation can ensure interpreted participants can contribute fully. Priorities include offering multiple interpretation options, compensating community interpreters, pacing meetings to support multilingual dialogue, and evaluating whether these efforts genuinely expanded who felt able to show up and speak.

Considerations for Including Youth.

Youth leadership in rural Vermont thrives when young people are invited in early, treated as full partners, and supported with structures that make participation feasible. Effective engagement starts by recognizing the wide range of “youth” experiences – from late-elementary students to young adults – and intentionally seeking out diverse voices rather than relying on a single spokesperson. Adults should name and navigate power dynamics, designing processes that clear space for youth ideas rather than overshadow them with “how things have always worked.” Compensation, credit, or recognition helps honor youth expertise and makes participation realistic amid school, work, and family demands. Meeting youth where they are – both physically and socially – by using familiar spaces, flexible schedules, accessible language, and peer-supported formats increases comfort and creativity. See “Engaging Youth: A Key to Community Vitality” for more information on youth inclusion and leadership.

Considerations for Accessibility.

When considering accessibility for a community process, design a process where people with disabilities are both welcomed as participants but also as potential committee chairs and volunteers. Disability is a wide umbrella that encompasses physical, mental and sensory health that can be temporary or lifelong. When inclusion goes beyond the first step, disabled residents can be a part of the process instead of an addition to an accommodations checklist. The best way to include people with disabilities is to become familiar with inclusive language and access needs. Terms such as “handicapped parking” or “special needs” should be avoided and replaced with terms like “accessible parking” and “reasonable accommodations.” Some towns have Accessibility Committees with detailed guidelines such as Plainfield’s accessible event guide that can be a template for others. For that guiding resource and many other resources for accessible/inclusive language and guidelines for events, see “Community Engagement Resources.”

Communicating with the Community

Communication is never a one-time task – it's an ongoing part of moving projects forward. It takes effort, but local leaders who build communication into every step report that it pays off in greater public understanding, fresh ideas, and renewed volunteerism. Plus, projects are less likely to meet with time-consuming opposition, because residents know their views have been heard and incorporated.

Communication is a cycle.

Projects tend to move forward with a rhythm, and successful leaders take advantage of each point in the cycle to communicate about their efforts.

Invite: Use the beginning of a project to welcome public engagement through information and events. Remember to use simple, jargon-free language with a focus on accessibility (see “Inviting the Public: Practical Tips”).

Co-create vision and priorities: Use two-way communication to determine collaboratively where the community wants to go (see “Developing a Community Vision” and “Setting Priorities for Action”).

Build public awareness and momentum: Use in-person, online, and other tools to keep the community up to date. Continually let people know where to find more information and how to get involved.

Share stories and celebrate successes: Don't wait for projects to be completed – offer regular updates on your achievements. Celebrate milestones, like when you receive a grant or break ground. Tell stories – one successful trail workday, or how a whole family got involved. Choose diverse stories (youth, seniors, new residents, etc.) so that over time everyone can see themselves in a story.

Invite again: People will be drawn to these positive stories! So never miss an opportunity to communicate how new people can join in.

Communication goes two-ways: The Art of Listening.

Half of communication is listening. When leaders listen effectively, they take in new information and opinions and use them to improve public efforts. If you're a leader who listens, you tend to:

Show curiosity and ask questions: Listen to understand fully and ask for more information when you need it.

Relax into a listening posture: When a friend is really listening to you, how can you tell? Elements probably include eye contact, open posture, and receptive facial expressions.

Reflect back what you hear: Re-stating a speaker's opinion to be sure you understand it does not mean you have to agree with it; it only shows that you have heard it, and you respect their right to share it.

Record and share what you hear. Record the diversity of public comments at meetings for all to see (for instance, on a flip chart) and include them in meeting minutes that get shared widely.

Create public policy that reflects what you hear: Show how decisions incorporate community input. Even in situations where one side “wins,” leaders can highlight the compromises, insights, and changes incorporated into the decision that were informed and influenced by the minority perspective.

Communication takes multiple tools.

Ask around: Where do people get their news? Everyone tunes in to different sources. Also, most folks need to hear something more than once before it sinks in. So, to reach the broadest audience, use a mix of communication tools, such as:

One-to-one: Make sure a person (or multiple people) is available to answer questions, neighbor to neighbor. Make their phone number or email available for people who want to learn more from a real person.

Face-to-face: Set up an information table at community events (concerts, sports events) and speak directly with your neighbors. You can also periodically visit with clubs and ask to be on the agenda of local committee meetings, to update them about your project.

Posters and signs: Make color copies using eye-catching artwork by volunteer local artists, and post on bulletin boards around town. In addition, many towns have bought or built sandwich boards to place at key town intersections.

Events: Host events to highlight your work. Invite the community to learn more, and if possible, offer hands-on opportunities for involvement (paint a mural, plant a tree). Offering children’s activities or displaying school projects related to your projects will bring in families.

Online and social media: Be active in this ever-expanding universe. See below.

Handouts: Communities have had success sending home flyers with school kids, and distributing them via clubs, business groups such as Rotary, and faith-based organizations. Consider making small flyers available on the counter wherever people stop in, like the general store, town clerk’s office, library, or café.

Mailings: Mailings are expensive, but a sure way to reach everyone in town. Postcards and bulk mailings are cheaper but often slower options. For flyers, find out if there is already a town mailing going out that you can piggy-back on. Sometimes you can find a business or organization to sponsor the mailing.

Surveys: Use a combination of online and printed surveys to discover more about community concerns. Be sure to report your findings to help participants know they’ve been heard.

Traditional Media: When you’d like your project to be covered by newspapers, radio or TV outlets, contact them directly. Give them the date, time, and location of your event or story, and be specific about why it would be of interest to their audience. You can also

submit commentaries or letters-to-the-editor, explore availability on public access stations, and submit event information to calendars. If you have the budget, consider placing ads.

In all of your communications, prioritize accessibility: Your project will be more welcoming to all when your outreach (print and online) avoids jargon and acronyms, is written in plain language, has high contrast between text and background, and complies with accessibility standards. For event publicity, be sure to note how participants can request reasonable accommodations.

Communication is ever-changing.

People's expectations about how leaders communicate have changed dramatically in the decades since the advent of the internet. Rather than waiting for information bulletins, voters expect ongoing transparency. Rather than accepting top-down decisions from leadership, they expect to be treated as partners.

Not all Vermonters have access to the internet, so always pair online communication with low-tech options.

Websites: Post information about your work on the town website or create your own project site. Update it as regularly as possible. Publicize the web address on all your communications. Alternatively, some groups have chosen to use a Facebook page as an online "home" for projects.

Online bulletin boards: Front Porch Forum and other services collect posts from the community and email them directly to their inboxes. Post about your project regularly and include links to your website.

Physical bulletin boards or signs: Most towns have a bulletin board in places like the Town Office or Town Hall, a general store, Post Office, hardware store, school, and at other major businesses and gathering places. Put up lawn signs and posters, hand out brochures or small flyers at events and with community groups to share out to their members.

Listservs: Check whether groups in your community (the parent-teacher organization, historical society, etc.) have an email network you can use to get your message out.

Social media: Encourage your organizing team to spread the word using their social media. Take advantage of Facebook, Instagram and other visual media by offering photogenic content such as hosting your event at an art installation or a scenic farm. To further publicize events, choose a hashtag and encourage organizers and participants to use it.

Communication takes patience.

Good communication creates slow, steady progress, but don't expect civic miracles. Even if people aren't flocking to your meetings, don't assume they don't hear you or don't care. By modeling the kind of engagement you hope to see, you are quietly strengthening a sense of community and reinforcing the message that participation is welcome. Over time, this builds trust and improves your local civic culture.

Developing A Community Vision

Projects are easier when everyone is working toward a common vision. Although it takes time up-front, developing a shared vision can be an invaluable investment: collaboration comes more easily, creativity is more likely to flow, and stumbling blocks are more easily overcome when the group is aligned around a common future. Many planners even recommend that towns revisit and refresh their vision at least once every five years. There are many ways to approach visioning; here, we offer a basic strategy that has worked in many Vermont communities.

Note that while the process described here is designed to create a community-wide vision, it can also be adapted to create a group vision for smaller projects such as renovating a public space or revamping a program.

First, take stock: Is a vision needed.

Not every effort needs to begin with a vision process. How can you tell whether the time is right?

Your community might benefit from a fresh vision statement if:

- Volunteerism is low and there's little energy for new projects
- Many people aren't aware of what's happening in town or how to engage
- You've been through a controversial time and need to bring people together
- Community members are excited to work together, but haven't agreed on priorities

You might not need to create a vision now if:

- The planning commission or other group has recently created a community vision statement, and people know about it
- Energy is clearly formed around a specific project or direction, and many people are ready to start working on it

Gather the community.

If you decide to move forward, gather the community for a 2-hour meeting. Remember, the most important element of a community vision is community — a vision statement will only have meaning if the community took the lead in creating it.

Give people plenty of time to hear about the process and put out the meeting invitation to as broad and diverse a group as possible (see "Inviting the Public").

A positive, confident local leader can lead the discussion, or you can hire a facilitator.

After welcoming the group and doing introductions, explain that:

- This process is intended to bring life, energy and new ideas
- There's no reason to get bogged down in details and wordsmithing—the goal is only to identify general points of vision for the future of the community, not specific projects (yet).
- This vision is not a binding document like the town plan, but a broader inspirational tool that you can revisit as needed

Brainstorm the qualities you'd most like to see.

Explain to the assembly that you'll now create a list of words, phrases or sentences that describe your community as you'd like to see it 10 years from now (or you can choose 5 years or 15 years—just make sure it's a time frame people can truly imagine). Remind them:

- Don't worry about money or politics too much — this is positive, "blue sky" visioning
- There will be no critiquing responses — if someone disagrees with a suggestion, they can simply add a suggestion they think is more fitting, and you will include them all for consideration
- This is not a time for speeches — only a single sentence (at most) at a time
- People can add multiple suggestions, but be sure everyone has a turn

When the brainstorming begins, record everyone's suggestions on flip charts or projected screen in front of the room where everyone can see them. Ideally people will call out ideas one at a time, but if it becomes noisy, you can ask people to raise their hands and be called on. Be sure to record every suggestion.

As you go along, there may be pauses; be comfortable with silence, since people might be formulating their next ideas. If necessary, the facilitator can gently prompt for categories that have not been mentioned yet. Have people described their vision for:

- Recreation
- Heritage and historic buildings
- Natural resources
- Business and entrepreneurship
- Social services
- Populations that have been excluded historically
- Education
- The arts
- Elders and retirees?
- Youth and family programs
- Religious and spiritual connections

When the facilitator feels most ideas have been voiced, ask if there are any last vision points before you move on. This may spur a few final suggestions.

Determine where there is broad agreement.

Not every participant will support every vision point, and that's expected. The goal is to determine which ones have the broad support of the group. A good rule of thumb is to include vision points that have the endorsement of at least $\frac{2}{3}$ of the group. You can use a variety of methods to determine support for vision points, including:

Method 1: Follow-up survey

End the meeting with a long list of brainstormed points. Turn that list into a survey, and present it at a next meeting and/or distribute it widely to the community, using both print and online formats. Ask participants to check the points of vision that they feel comfortable including in a community vision statement and leave blank those that they don't agree should be included.

Method 2: Dot-voting or check-mark voting

Continue the meeting by writing each point of vision on a sheet of flipchart paper. Give participants sticky dots and ask them to place one dot on each statement they believe should be included in community vision. Alternatively, hand out markers and have people vote by putting a check next to the statements they support. Vision points that receive at least two-thirds support could be included in the final list while those with fewer than that will be left off. A follow-up survey distributed broadly in both print and online formats can help ensure a more inclusive and representative result.

Compile the vision.

Your statement may now be complete, or you might want to have a competent writer (or team) finalize it without over editing – participants should be able to recognize their specific words and phrasing. Combine or clump ideas that are similar. Flowing sentences aren't critical; lists are fine.

Don't be afraid to have your vision statement reflect your community in its quirky uniqueness. It might be pointed, it might be directed and prescriptive, it might even be beautiful. What matters most is that it feels true to the people who shaped it and captures the character, values, and aspirations of the community.

Make sure all participants receive a copy of the final vision statement and put it to use (see "Setting Priorities for Action"). Your vision statement is a time capsule of the community's values, hopes and dreams. It could keep you going for years to come.

Here is a sample list of vision points from a community we worked with in 2016:

Residents look to a future where the community:

- ❖ is economically and environmentally sustainable.
- ❖ has a vibrant and compact downtown community surrounded by a rural and working landscape.
- ❖ has protected its Lake and water quality into the future.
- ❖ has a variety of ways to participate in the natural beauty that surrounds town.
Residents take part in physical activities, such as hiking, that connect them to its natural assets.
- ❖ is family-oriented with activities and events that bring people of all ages to town.
- ❖ is well-connected with active and engaged citizens and community volunteers.
- ❖ communicates with and supports residents and actively reaches out and welcomes new folks to town.
- ❖ has access to fresh and local fruits and vegetables.
- ❖ is connected to our youth and the school is a center point of community engagement.
- ❖ celebrates the history and shares it with our youth, and their connection to place helps them appreciate and protect it for the future.
- ❖ has many writers, crafters, singers, and other artists who contribute to a thriving art culture.
- ❖ can access affordable housing and childcare for all.
- ❖ is a place of natural beauty and simplicity; a place we come home to.

Setting Priorities for Action

One of the most powerful experiences for any community is to turn a vision into action. While there are many methods for doing this, the steps outlined below have helped many Vermont communities identify their top priorities. While the process described here is designed to identify community-wide priorities, this technique can be adapted to help a smaller group set priorities for a specific project such as renovating a public space or revamping a program.

It is critical that this work be led by an individual or team that has the trust of the community (not someone seen as pushing their own agenda). Several of these steps also require skilled facilitation. Some communities are fortunate enough to have the leadership and expertise necessary within the community itself; for others, hiring a professional facilitator will be especially helpful for this effort.

☆ **Tip: Begin with a shared vision.**

For a project to have the long-term support necessary to make it a reality, the whole community should feel ownership and connection. Some communities are already prepared to work together toward a common goal; others need a process to build that shared foundation. One tool to foster broad support – and identify a core of volunteers – is to begin with a community visioning process. For guidance on how to do this, see “Developing a Community Vision.”

Organize the community to brainstorm priorities.

Invite the whole community to a two-meeting process for identifying ideas and priorities for the future.

Set two meeting dates, spaced roughly 2-4 weeks apart. Set the dates far enough in advance to allow plenty of time for outreach to invite broad community participation.

Be as inclusive as possible in inviting the public (see “Inviting the Public”).

Be very specific about the purpose of this two-meeting process – that it will focus on setting priorities for your community and create local action groups who will build concrete plans to move forward.

Hold the first meeting: identify strengths, challenges and opportunities.

Welcome: Introduce event leaders and go over the meeting agenda. If your community has a vision document, have copies on hand and/or review it at the beginning of the gathering. Circulate a sign-in sheet so that you collect all participants’ names and contact information so you can communicate with them along the way.

Strengths: Ask the group to brainstorm a list of the *strengths* of the community. Remind them that your community is unique, and your list can reflect the special personality of your town.

Record the group's ideas on flip charts or a projected screen in front of the room so that everyone can see it. Be sure to write down all ideas. As you progress, don't worry that there may be pauses while people gather their thoughts.

Encourage the group to be creative. If needed, the facilitator can gently prompt for ideas that may not have come up yet, such as:

- Physical resources like buildings and infrastructure
- Mountains, swimming holes, and other natural features
- Local businesses, entrepreneurs, artists
- Governance elements such as active committees or town meeting
- Social assets such as schools and health care
- Cultural strengths such as a proud history, a strong sense of volunteerism and neighborliness, seasonal festivals

Challenges: Now use the same process to brainstorm a list of the community's most pressing *challenges*. Every community has some issues they would like to address. Some may be recent or emerging challenges; some may be long-standing issues.

Remind folks that this is not a time for speeches. Ideally this will be a list of single words or phrases.

Likewise, this isn't the time for debate. If a person disagrees with what's listed on the board, they will get a chance to make their case during the follow-up discussion.

Anyone can offer multiple ideas but be sure everyone has a turn.

Opportunities for Action: Use the same process to brainstorm a list of ideas for action that the community could take to address the identified challenges or build on local assets. Consider how the community's unique strengths can be applied to its most pressing needs.

Remind participants that this step is about ideas that we can take on together as a community — not things we wish the Selectboard or the legislature would do. Focus on local actions that volunteers, organizations, and community groups can advance directly.

At this point in the discussion, it can be tempting to go back to listing challenges. It is important that the facilitator keeps the discussion on track and pointed toward action. If someone lists a challenge, ask, "What actions might we take to solve that problem or address that challenge?"

 **Tip: If you have a large group, you can break into subgroups for this step. Assign each subgroup a topic area relevant to your community. Each subgroup brainstorms the strengths, challenges, and opportunities for its topic, then reports back to the full group. There are countless possible topic areas, so choose those most relevant to your community. Sample topic areas might include:**

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Infrastructure and Transportation
(wastewater, buildings, roads, etc.) | • Community Gathering Spaces |
| • Education and Social Services | • Housing |
| • Natural Resources and the Outdoors | • Recreation |
| • Local Economy and Businesses | • Neighborliness and Connection |
| | • Arts and Cultural Heritage |

Encourage people to think creatively. This is just a brainstorming discussion, and nothing is set in stone. All ideas will be captured for future discussion.

Coordinate between meetings.

The time between meetings is when members of the organizing team will complete several key tasks:

Distill lists into opportunities for potential action.

Review the full list of action ideas generated at the meeting and group similar items into broad topic areas. This step takes time and careful reading, as you work to recognize patterns and cluster related ideas. By the end, you will have identified 15-25 potential action topics that a community task force could form around.

For example: One idea on the list may be focused on creating a new trail in the Town Forest, another on youth bike programming, and another on building a path connecting the school to the Village Center. Together, these might suggest an emerging theme such as “Advance Outdoor Recreation and Trails.”

It can be challenging to look at a diverse list objectively and identify the themes running through it. If you are working with a professional facilitator, their support can be especially valuable for this step.

Continue community outreach.

Between the two meetings, continue gathering action ideas from the broader community – both to reach those who couldn’t attend in person and to give participants who did attend a chance to add ideas they think of afterward. A good way to do this is by distributing a survey, in both paper and online formats, and sharing it around town, on social media, and through local email lists. This outreach helps ensure wider participation, brings in new ideas, and may generate additional interest in the second meeting.

Publicize.

Use the same inclusive outreach methods you used for the first meeting. In addition, follow up with the participants who shared their contact information at the first meeting to remind them about the second meeting.

Hold the second meeting: set priorities.

Welcome.

Have a sign-in sheet to collect participants’ names and contact information. Introduce the event leaders and go over the meeting agenda. Briefly review what happened at the first meeting to bring everyone to a shared understanding of what has already happened and what comes next.

Review opportunities.

Place a list of the 15-25 opportunities in front of the room – ideally with each one on a separate flip chart sheet. Explain that these priorities were distilled from the ideas brainstormed at the first meeting and from survey responses. One way to ensure everyone hears each idea is to invite community members to take turns reading each idea aloud.

Then, ask the group whether any major ideas for action were missed and should be included. This is not the time to debate which ideas are best; it's simply the moment to add ideas that participants feel should have been included but are not yet on the list.

Conduct first round of “Gut-Check” voting.

Distribute colored dot-stickers for voting, giving each participant a set number (6-8 seems to work well). Participants may place their dots wherever they choose – spreading them across several priorities or putting all of them on a single idea they feel strongly about. Once everyone has voted, have volunteers tally the dots for each action idea. Identify the top eight ideas, rewrite them on fresh flipchart sheets, and bring them back to the full group for the next step.

Champion priorities for action.

Once the top eight ideas are on the wall, give the group enough time – at least an hour – for a facilitated discussion about which ideas should be prioritized. Ask the group to reflect on:

- Is this item actionable?
- Is it already being addressed?
- Is it within the power of the community to take on?
- Which ideas are most important and would have the most impact?

Invite participants to discuss which ideas they believe should rise to the top at this moment. Encourage them to champion the opportunities they see as most important for the community's future. Some ideas may be low-hanging fruit that offer early wins; others may take years to achieve but ultimately be transformational. Both types of ideas are valuable.

Combine—cautiously.

Participants may see opportunities to clump similar ideas together. In some cases, combining ideas makes sense – for example, “start a farmers’ market” and “create Community Supported Agriculture enterprises” might be merged under a broader theme such as “Advance local food initiatives”. But resist the urge to over-combine. Projects need to remain at a scale that is manageable and realistically actionable. Keeping ideas distinct helps ensure that each potential project has a clear focus and can be taken on by a committed group of volunteers.

Prioritize the top projects.

Once the discussion winds down, distribute dot stickers again – 3-5 dots per person in this round works well. Ask participants to vote by placing their dots on the ideas they believe should be the top priorities for action.

After everyone has voted, tally the dots to identify the ideas that rose to the top. The number of priority projects will vary by community and its capacity. Consider your community's volunteer base and decide in advance how many projects are realistic to take on. In most communities, 2-4 priority projects is a manageable and effective number, but choose what works best for yours.

 **Tip: For a clearer picture of people's priorities, you can use weighted voting where dots of different colors have different point values. For example, give each participant one red dot worth three points and three green dots worth one point each. Participants can spread their dots across multiple ideas, or put them all on one. Weighted voting can help show not only which ideas people support, but where their strongest passion lies.**

Create a task force for each project.

Congratulate the group on their hard work and celebrate the exciting action priorities they have chosen. Remind participants that while these top priorities will move forward first, the ideas that weren't selected can be revisited when the community is ready for additional projects.

Take a moment to acknowledge the significance of what the group has accomplished. The people in the room are showing up for their town – this is democracy in action. Their willingness to participate, listen, debate, and choose a shared path forward is the kind of local leadership that keeps communities strong. The projects they have identified have proven they have broad support, and working together to bring them to life will be meaningful and rewarding.

Create a sign-up sheet for each of the top priority projects. Ask participants to sign up to sign up for the task force(s) they feel connected to and want to help with and include their contact information for follow up.

Continue the momentum through task forces.

Get the word out widely about the success of your 2-meeting process. Share the priorities that were selected, upcoming meeting dates of the task force groups forming to move them forward, and contact information for anyone who wants to learn more or get involved (see "Communicating with the Community").

Once task forces have formed, ensure each group selects a chair or co-chairs. Chairs will take the lead on setting agendas, facilitating meetings, and helping shepherd the project forward. The chair should schedule the first meeting and reach out to everyone who signed up. (Task Force chairs may want to review "Managing Effective Meetings.")

Take a moment to acknowledge what this process has accomplished and to appreciate both those who helped shape the ideas and those stepping forward to take action on the chosen priorities. This is democracy in action: community members listening to one

another, choosing shared priorities, and committing themselves to the work ahead. That dedication – showing up, engaging, and taking action for the future – is what turns ideas into progress and keeps the town moving forward.

Setting priorities is the launching point for projects that will strengthen your town's community, economy, and quality of life. Now the work begins to put those ideas into action! Community-led projects take time and dedication, but you are not alone. Part III of this guide offers strategies to help you get started with your specific projects and resources to support you along the way.



Managing Effective Meetings

Whether you're a veteran leader or this is your first time at the helm, everyone wins when meetings are more efficient and transparent. Effective management not only makes meetings more productive. It also helps everyone feel respected, strengthens public trust, and even makes it easier to recruit and retain volunteers.

Publicize effectively.

Use a variety of methods to publicize the meeting. You might include mailings, bulletin boards, the town website, Front Porch Forum, newspapers, newsletters, emails, and phone calls. (Public bodies need to follow legal warning requirements, but don't rely on that to inspire involvement.) Make sure that all publicity materials include the *date, time, location, and purpose* of the gathering. If this meeting will be online or hybrid, include the meeting link (or how to get it). Include information on how people can request reasonable accommodation (see "Inviting the Public" and "Using Online, Hybrid, Artificial Intelligence, and Other Digital Technologies").

Set up the room to serve the purpose.

Choose a venue that is neutral and familiar to participants and make the room welcoming. In formal situations, such as town meetings and public hearings, you may want leaders seated at a table in front of the room with participants in rows facing them. For most community meetings, however, that setup isn't necessary and can feel intimidating. Instead, arrange chairs in a circle or V-shape so participants can see and hear one another. If people will be working in small groups, set up tables to support that format. For hybrid meetings, consider how online participants will be able to see, hear, and participate.

Be sure your meeting location is accessible, including considerations such as parking, restrooms, and aisle space that accommodates wheelchair users. Organize audio and visual equipment that allows everyone to participate fully.

Make sure the room has adequate heat, air flow, and lighting. Offering simple, nourishing refreshments helps people feel welcome and gives them the energy to stay for the whole meeting. Have a sign-in sheet available and provide name tags if appropriate.

Define leadership roles.

Ideally, one person will chair the meeting, and another will take notes. You may also want to assign a timekeeper to make sure you stay on track with the agenda. Roles do not need to stay fixed from meeting to meeting, but for each meeting make sure someone is prepared to chair, and someone to take notes. If the meeting is hybrid, assign another person to be the virtual facilitator to support those participating online (see Using Online, Hybrid, Artificial Intelligence, and Other Digital Technologies").

Create agenda and minutes.

Draft a simple agenda before the meeting and distribute it well ahead of time. Invite suggestions and additions. At the meeting, make sure everyone can see and follow the agenda – hand out copies, post it on a flip chart, and ensure remote participants have access to it. At the start of the meeting, you can ask whether anyone has agenda items to add.

The agenda usually begins with a welcome and introductions, followed by a brief review of what happened at the last meeting. It should then outline the topics to be addressed, who will lead each item, the allotted for each topic, and any actions needed.

The notes taken from a well-constructed agenda can serve as the basis for the meeting minutes. Good minutes will provide a roadmap for the next meeting's agenda.

Welcome and introduce participants.

Start the meeting on time. Welcome people and remind them of the meeting's purpose. If the group isn't too big, invite each person to introduce themselves – perhaps sharing their name, the road they live on, and a community connection that inspired them to come to the meeting. Go over the ground rules if using them (see "Dealing with Disagreement"). If the meeting is hybrid, be sure to bring remote participants into the conversation so they can see, hear, and participate in the discussion.

Have an effective chair.

The person shepherding the group – let's call them the chair – has special responsibilities. If you're the chair, here are some guidelines for you:

During the meeting.

Serve the entire group. Not a faction, not an interest, and especially not a self-interest. The chair works for everyone. Your first job is to be sure that there is a fair and productive dialogue. If the meeting is hybrid, treat online participants equally, with the help of a virtual participant facilitator.

Set the agenda. Not in your personal interest but representing all the ideas of the group.

Keep the focus. Manage the meeting to the agenda and timeline (see "Facilitating in Demanding Moments").

Maintain group agreements and expected processes. Help the group set some ground rules for how they want to operate and then enforce them. These group agreements generally include a process for how the group makes a decision or delegates, and rules for respectful and productive conduct. The chair moderates so that participants are recognized, interrupters are gently reminded to wait their turn, and disagreements find a resolution. For suggestions, see "Dealing with Disagreement."

Remain neutral while encouraging the expression of all viewpoints. Help make sure everyone's opinions are heard, not just the vocal members.

Be aware of different communication styles. People may participate differently due to gender, age, class, race, or cultural norms. Be alert to these differences and work to help everyone be heard.

Recognize and respect unpopular opinions. Even if certain views are not widely supported, ensure that these perspectives are heard, respected, and recorded. They are valuable in understanding issues fully, and in framing future initiatives.

Be the listener for points of consensus and highlight members' ideas that reinforce group unity.

Help group members make decisions and commitments

- Don't make decisions for the group. Instead, say "here's what I'm hearing, and here's one direction we could go. What do people think?"
- At the end of each agenda item ask "So, given all we've discussed, what are our action steps? Who will do what after the meeting?"
- Even if the steps are very small, there should be group buy-in. Create agreement that "these things will be done by these people" in the interest of the full group.

Make sure there is buy-in for the group's decisions and homework. Sum up commitments at the end of meetings. "Tom and Maria agreed to do _____ to move agenda item 3 forward... Here's what I heard as other key points for our next meeting agenda. Does anyone have other items to add?"

Be a cheerleader by praising members of the committee and thanking people for doing their part. It is the chair's job to help people see that "we will succeed" – which can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Unite the group by helping each person feel valued, listened to, and important to the success of the project.

Set the next meeting date and make sure everyone knows when it is.

After the meeting.

Keep track of the work assigned so that you can ask for updates at the start of the next meeting (or at the appropriate point in the agenda for each update).

Communicate what happened. Using the same wide variety of tools used to publicize the meeting, along with the contact information on the sign-in sheet, make meeting notes available. You may want to create a website or other online presence for your effort so people can find agendas and minutes (see "Communicating with the Community").

Speak for the group in public, if the group has given you this role. Not with your own opinions or plans, but on behalf of the consensus achieved. The chair makes the group's efforts visible, showcasing the good work done by the whole team going forward.

Dealing with Disagreement

Preparing for Challenging Meetings and Challenging Personalities

An important part of being a leader is helping people get along. Every community has its share of differences of opinion, but this doesn't mean meetings have to be unpleasant. Here are some tips for keeping meetings constructive and productive.

Before the Meeting.

Offer clear and trustworthy communication.

If someone shows up at a meeting with a negative attitude, it is often because they don't trust the process. Make this less likely by committing early to open communication.

Be clear and consistent about the purpose of the group, when and where it's meeting, what it will do, and how people can stay informed and involved (see "Framing a Process for Public Engagement").

Actively welcome the community into the process (see "Inviting the Public").

Follow through between meetings with informative updates and make sure someone is available to respond to information requests (see "Communicating with the Community").

Be sensitive to how your efforts might be received by people of different backgrounds (e.g. differences in income, education, race, place of origin) and strive to be inclusive (see "Including Diverse Leadership and Participation in Community Processes").

Help people know what to expect.

Few things frustrate participants more than realizing the meeting isn't what they thought it would be. Clearly state the purpose of the meeting in all of your outreach so participants understand what will happen and what is expected of them. Is this an informational meeting, where people are primarily listening? A consultation, where people will share opinions and perspectives? A collaboration, where participants will work together on problems or generate ideas? A decision-making meeting, where participants have binding authority to choose a path forward? Any of these may be appropriate, as long as people know what to expect.

Bring a positive attitude.

Do something energizing before you attend the meeting. Whether it's running around with your kids, playing your favorite song, or enjoying a cup of coffee, it's helpful for you as a leader to arrive at the meeting feeling enthusiastic and positive.

During the Meeting.

Establish ground rules.

When gathering a group for the first time or on a topic that may be controversial, suggest “ground rules” or “community agreements” for participation. Ground rules used commonly by many groups:

- Share the floor – everyone participates, no one dominates.
- Listen carefully to others and remain open to ideas.
- Only one person talks at a time.
- Avoid personal attacks on people – focus on the issue.
- It’s okay to disagree but do so respectfully.

Go over a list with the group at the beginning of the meeting and ask if anyone has any additions or changes. Then ask if everyone is willing to agree to follow the rules for this meeting. Post them in front of the room and bring them to subsequent meetings as a reminder. If meeting quality starts to deteriorate, you can remind the group of the rules they have agreed to.

Groups that meet on a regular basis may wish to add other ground rules, such as starting/ending on time, arriving prepared, not allowing phones/devices to distract from the meeting, limiting side conversations, “me then three” (wait for three other people to speak before you speak again), or other rules that could support their specific group.

Model positive meeting behavior.

Every participant plays a part in setting the tone. A positive presence can go a long way.

- Listen actively, with interest and curiosity about new ideas.
- Your face and body tell a story, so try to relax. Maintain a positive, attentive expression, and make eye contact with participants.
- Ask friendly clarifying questions to help people express themselves.
- Reflect back what you hear.

Be a good meeting facilitator.

A good meeting facilitator (who may also be the chair) helps everyone feel welcome, comfortable, and included. A facilitator should:

- Make sure everyone is familiar with the agenda.
- Involve everyone. Welcome a variety of opinions and balance the group’s participation.
- Be aware that people from different backgrounds and cultures communicate differently. If possible, offer a range of formats (small groups, one-on-one discussions, storytelling, written feedback etc.) so that all voices are heard in the manner that is most comfortable for them.
- Recognize all viewpoints (difficult, but especially vital, when you disagree with the view being shared).
- Listen actively, showing equal interest in everyone’s opinions.

- Only speak as much as absolutely necessary. You are there to serve the group, and the focus should be on the meeting topic, not on you.
- Welcome variety. Some of the best ideas come to light when seemingly different concepts come together.
- De-personalize issues. Once a person has proposed an idea, don't refer to it as "Rob's idea" but by topic ("the flowerbox suggestion.") Keep the focus on ideas, not individuals.
- Help the group come to consensus if possible, but if there is disagreement, record the range of opinions.
- Be aware of the group's energy. Watch for body language that may suggest the group needs a break or is ready to move on to another topic.
- If the meeting is for idea generation, record the group's ideas on a flip chart or screen in front of the room. This helps people know they are being heard. Confirm with speakers that their ideas were recorded as intended.
- Manage the process. Gently but firmly focus and re-focus the discussion to the agenda item. Don't let unproductive discussions continue.
- Keep the meeting on schedule and ensure top-priority tasks are achieved.
- If the meeting is hybrid, be sure that someone is assigned to be the virtual participant facilitator and collaborate with them to be sure that both in-room and online participants can engage equally (see "Using Online, Hybrid, Artificial Intelligence, and Other Digital Technologies").
- See "Facilitating in Demanding Moments" for additional suggestions.

Close the meeting by summarizing what it achieved – what was agreed on, what actions people committed to, and what will happen next. Remind everyone how they can stay involved and where they can find notes from this gathering, both for themselves and for those who couldn't attend.

Consider conducting a brief meeting evaluation to improve future meetings. This could be a quick group brainstorm on a flip chart or a short two-question survey asking:

- The most effective/useful part of this meeting was _____.
- What I would change about future meetings would be _____.

Thank everyone for their time and contributions. Let them know their participation is valued and that their presence made a meaningful difference.

Facilitating in Demanding Moments

Every meeting has its moments, but with good facilitation, you can help smooth them out. Here are some challenging scenarios, and a variety of facilitator responses that can help the meeting get past the rough spots.

Someone is talking too much or keeps making the same point.

Often when people repeat themselves, it's because they don't feel heard or understood. You don't have to agree with someone to help them feel heard. You can say, "You have strong feelings about this issue, and I want to be sure we have it on the record. Is this what you're saying?"

Record ideas on a flip chart or screen for everyone to see or designate someone in the room to scribe. If a participant continues to repeat the same point, refer back to the flip chart or scribe: "I think we recorded that idea – let's make sure we have it right." Then ask the group to focus on new ideas to add to the list.

If one or two voices continue to dominate, you can set a rule that no one speaks a second time until all those who want to speak have had a turn. This helps balance participation and helps ensure all voices are heard.

A participant says something that is unclear.

"Can you tell us that point again? I want to make sure we record correctly."

"Could you tell us more about that?"

"Can you give an example of how that might work?"

Someone is being disrespectful.

Beginning the meetings with ground rules could be helpful to prevent disrespect (see "Dealing With Disagreement"). Gently remind the group of the ground rules and say "We know these issues matter deeply to everyone, and emotions can run high. That's why we adopted these guidelines – to help us stay focused and move forward together."

"We have limited time, and we'll succeed more quickly if we can put our personal differences aside and focus on the ideas we have in common."

"John, it sounds like you feel strongly about this. Can you tell us your top three priorities? Then we can look for what we may have in common."

If necessary, take a break and speak with the person privately about how they can help keep the meeting civil.

Some people aren't participating at all.

"It feels like there are some people in the room who haven't had a chance to share their ideas – is there anyone who hasn't spoken yet who wants to share an idea?"

"Are there folks here with experience as a (teacher, farmer...) who'd like to weigh in?"

The discussion is straying off topic.

"As a reminder, the question we're discussing is _____."

"We need to re-focus on the topic, which is _____. Let's go around the circle and have each person offer one idea on the topic."

Create one flip chart in the room labeled "bike rack" (or "other issues") where you can record ideas that you don't want to forget, but that aren't on topic right now. Recording a person's idea allows them to let go of it and return to the main topic. Be sure to include these "bike rack" ideas in the meeting minutes and come back to them at a future meeting.

The discussion is circular, repetitive, or negative.

Try to reframe the question. Rather than blame anyone, help the group take responsibility as a whole, by saying something like "We all agree on how frustrating this is. Now let's move forward: what are some practical and positive actions we can take to make progress from here?"

"It seems like we're starting to go around and around on this one. So at this point, I'd like to ask for comments that are new to the discussion."

People are having side conversations.

Be gentle but firm, saying "We all need to be on the same page, so let's come back to a common conversation until we break."

"Tom, please hold off until you're recognized by the chair so we can all benefit from what you're thinking."

If the room is large, the facilitator can physically move toward the people who are talking, which will draw attention to their part of the room and usually quiets them down.

People are dancing around the real issue.

Remind people of the fundamental reason for the meeting. Be provocative as needed. For instance, ask, "Are we agreeing that A and B are our top two priorities?" or "Are we ready to name _____ as an action item?" Participants are here to take a hard look at issues, and you can ask probing questions to help ideas go from "maybes" to decision points.

You're running out of time.

Alert the group that you've almost used up the allotted agenda time for a topic and offer a suggestion. You can say, "We're almost out of time. Are there a couple of us who are ready to take the lead on this, and report back to the group next time?"

“We’re getting close to a decision, but it seems like people have additional points to make. Shall we continue this discussion for another ____ minutes? It means we’ll adjust the agenda by ____ minutes elsewhere.” (For instance, move the final agenda item to the next meeting.)

Things really get out of hand.

Call a ten-minute break to allow people to cool down.

Consider hiring a professional facilitator for the next couple of meetings. An objective, skilled process professional can be just what’s needed to change a group’s dynamic.

Group members may want to get some training in conflict resolution.

★ **Tip: This list might make meetings sound challenging, but most meetings won’t encounter many of these issues. Remember that people show up because they care about their community. When you assume good intentions and model constructive, respectful leadership, it encourages participants to bring their best selves to the conversation.**



Using Online, Hybrid, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and other Digital Technologies

Whether you want to increase access, minimize travel time and expense, or engage with partners from far-off corners of the state and beyond, virtual tools can help you connect. Careful planning and attention to detail are needed to be sure these tools improve communication, efficiency, and collaboration. Use the info as a starting point for research on which productivity applications will benefit your group's productivity and to help you decide between fully online, fully in-person, or hybrid meetings.

Tips for Hosting Effective Online Meetings.

In many ways, meetings that are held fully online are similar to in-person meetings, and much of the same guidance applies (see "Managing Effective Meetings," "Dealing with Disagreement," and "Facilitating in Demanding Moments"). However, there are a few key differences. Here are some strategies to ensure high-quality online meetings.

Pre-Meeting Preparation

- Keep in mind that internet access is still mixed across Vermont. Not everyone may be able to participate in an online-only convening. You could offer an internet-free way to participate such as a phone call-in option.
- Note that some formal bodies are required to offer an in-person option under Open Meeting Law. Such "hybrid" meetings involve the following considerations plus a few additional ones; see "Additions for Hybrid Meetings" below.
- Give careful thought to the format you use; e.g. a webinar format for large or presentation-based meetings allows less interaction but offers more control of participant interaction.
- Prepare and test your systems ahead of time. Make sure presenters or facilitators are familiar with the online meeting platform. Make sure you understand all of the functions and features of the system you are using.
- Send agendas, documents for reference, and full instructions for how to join the online meeting room (including phone-in numbers) well ahead of time.

Roles & Responsibilities

- Appoint a meeting facilitator to lead the discussion.
- Designate others to fill specific roles including monitoring participants and the meeting chat (if used), troubleshooting any technical issues, and recording the meeting or taking meeting minutes.

- Agree on ground rules for the meeting (see “Managing Effective Meetings”), including ones specific to online meetings as necessary. Depending on the size and familiarity of your group, these might include:
 - Mute yourself except when you are speaking, to minimize background noise
 - Focus on the meeting and avoid multitasking
 - If anyone is participating by voice-only, everyone should identify themselves each time they speak
 - Use the highest quality option available to you (e.g. avoid speakerphone if possible).

What’s on the Agenda

- If this is not a regular meeting, assume that the first 10-15 minutes may be focused on getting everyone connected, so build that into the agenda.
- Skill and comfort levels with technology can present a barrier. Plan time to ensure participants are familiar with the platform you are using.
- Design a clear agenda knowing that it can be harder to focus in virtual meetings than in-person meetings. This may mean making the agenda shorter and including breaks.
- Send agendas, visuals or documents for reference, and clear instructions for joining the online meeting (including phone-in numbers).
- Be clear about whether the meeting will be recorded and how captions or transcripts will be used.
- Encourage cameras but do not require them; ask participants to label their screen with their name.
- Use captions to support accessibility.
- Build in a brief round of introductions or check-ins at the beginning of the meeting as appropriate.
- If you expect participants to use specific tools (e.g. the chat function), go over how you want them to be used at the beginning of the meeting.
- When facilitating, allow time for everyone to chime in, recognizing that there may be slight delays. To shorten pauses, the facilitator can be more direct than at an in-person meeting, for instance by calling on people by name.
- Be prepared for disruptive participants, using the online meeting platform as a facilitation tool. Options include moving the participant to a waiting room to discuss the problem with a backup facilitator, disabling key participant tools (e.g. their private chat and unmute tools), and if necessary, removing a disruptive participant.

Additions for Hybrid Meetings.

Hybrid meetings, with participants both in-person and online, broaden accessibility. However, they require more preparation – in many ways you are preparing for two meetings. In addition to the “Tips for Hosting Effective Online Meetings” above, keep these guidelines in mind.

Pre-Meeting Preparation

- Use reliable, easy-to-see equipment: a monitor or projector so that in-person folks can see online folks, a good conference camera so that those online can see the room, clear microphones, and ideally a wired internet connection.
- Assign two key roles:
 - In-room facilitator to guide the conversation.
 - Virtual-room facilitator who is in-person but is focused on watching the virtual room, raising their hand on behalf of online participants, and reading comments.
- If using visuals, share them ahead of time and type key points into the chat. If taking notes, consider using some kind of live-updating shared document.

What's on the Agenda

- Build in extra time for technical needs and slower pacing needed to bridge the virtual and physical spaces.
- Share any housekeeping rules early – how chat will be used, when questions will be taken, and how participants can get help.
- Welcome online participants directly and check that they can see and hear the room.
- Explain participation norms for both groups, including how chat comments will be handled.
- Make sure in-room participants use microphones so everyone can hear clearly.
- Keep visuals accessible by reading key points aloud.

Alternative Formats

- Buddy system: Pair each online participant with someone in the room for quick communication and support.
- One-person, one-screen: If everyone in the group has a laptop and internet access, have all participants join individually and return it to a fully online meeting. This gives equal audio and visual access and simplifies facilitation.

Online Collaboration.

Just as certain tasks are best delegated to members of the group as “homework,” a number of online collaborative tools can help you advance projects outside of a virtual meeting.

Online collaboration tools can make it easy for groups to work together between meetings, share documents, and keep projects moving. Most major file creation and editing platforms (Microsoft Office, LibreOffice, Google Workspace, iWork, etc) now allow multiple people to edit the same file at once, store materials in shared folders, and link to documents without long downloads or version confusion. Groups should discuss and agree on the platform(s) they want to use and the file-sharing structure and permissions so that collaborators can view, comment, or edit as needed. These agreements will probably need to be revisited over time as your work and roles change.

You may want to assign someone in the group to regularly maintain the files so that they stay organized.

There are also many tools for communicating that go beyond emails. Collaboration platforms (Teams, Gmail, Slack, Zoom) offer a number of other options such as group messaging, topic-based channels, task-organization, and built-in video or audio call features so conversations and files stay in one place.

Used well, these tools help community groups stay coordinated, reduce email clutter, and keep everyone connected even when they're working from different places or on different schedules.

A Note on Privacy & Data Collection.

Privacy and data use are important to consider when choosing online collaboration tools. Most commercial platforms collect some information about how people use their services, and their terms of use can be long and hard to parse. Open-source tools offer an alternative: they are often built by public communities, allow more transparency about how data is handled, and can be hosted locally to give groups more control. Some people may prefer to avoid online tools altogether, while others find that the benefits – accessibility, flexibility, and the ability to work across distances – outweigh the concerns. Each community should choose the mix of tools that fits its comfort level, values, and needs, balancing privacy with the practical advantages of working together online.

Ethical Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Artificial intelligence is becoming more common in community work, and its effects on rural places are still emerging – sometimes helpful, sometimes harmful. Communities should approach AI with care, keeping human values and judgment at the center. Review AI-generated content, label it clearly, and avoid sharing personal or sensitive information. Check for bias that could affect small towns, youth, or underrepresented groups, and be aware that AI systems can make mistakes or oversimplify local issues. AI also uses significant energy, so it's worth limiting unnecessary tasks. When used thoughtfully, AI can help with drafting materials, organizing information, translating text, or summarizing data, but final decisions – especially those affecting funding, planning, or policy – must remain with people. Clear community principles around transparency, equity, accountability, and sustainability can help ensure AI supports rural work without replacing local knowledge or values.

Fostering Strong Municipal-Community Partnerships

Does your community have a group of residents ready to work with local government? Great! This type of collaboration can offer enormous benefits. Selectboards and other municipal bodies can get fresh ideas and energy, and citizen groups can benefit from the guidance and power of their local government. But community groups and municipal bodies are very different beasts. Here are some key considerations to ensure that you understand each other and focus on your shared interest – the common good of your community.

Note: This section assumes that you have a group with a project idea and are ready to work with your town government. If your community is interested in exploring how to get more public engagement, see “Increasing Civic Engagement and Municipal Capacity.”

For local government officials: Reminders for working effectively with community members.

Welcome new participation. Folks who are new to public engagement are often mystified or even intimidated by the invisible systems (elections, laws, regulations) you know well. Greet their interest positively, assume good intention, and take the time to help them define their goals and direction. This early investment will help you move forward productively.

Appreciate residents’ risk-taking. Local involvement is often a person’s first step into public life. Be aware that a resident may feel anxiety about publicly stating their beliefs and acting on their values. Patience and a listening ear are always appreciated.

Channel people’s energy. Use your knowledge of local systems to imagine how their ideas can dovetail with current projects. Which board, commission, or committee could partner with or support this new idea?

Define clear lines of authority. If local officials agree that a new group should partner with the local government, you’ll need to know what the group’s specific charge is, what authority (if any) you are giving them, and the project timeframe.

Define clear lines of communication. How will this group communicate with local officials? Set a schedule for check-ins.

If it’s not a good fit. If you have to say “no,” or “not now,” help the group identify other partners. You have valuable community knowledge – who should they connect with? Businesses? Nonprofits? Schools? Encourage the group to keep you updated on their efforts.

For community groups: Reminders for working effectively with municipal officials.

Ask local officials how best to communicate about your project.

- General “public comment” time in meetings can be limited, so larger projects may want to seek time on a board’s agenda. Ask the board chair how they prefer to handle requests for placement on their agenda, then follow their protocol. Periodically offering a report and requesting feedback at a board’s public meetings is an important way to ensure clear, transparent communication.
- While some local officials (town clerks, town administrators) are paid staff, many local positions (selectboard, planning commissioners, etc.) are largely volunteer. While they have accepted responsibility for particular work, they are carving time out of their lives to make it happen. When engaging in phone or email communication, be respectful of officials’ personal time and schedules.

Recognize that municipal officials are working within local expectations and statutory constraints. These include:

- **Open Meeting Law (OML).** OML was designed to improve transparency. In doing so, it places significant legal restrictions on the types of communication many public officials can engage in. OML limits officials’ communication with each other between meetings; it limits the types of information that can be exchanged in group emails; and it limits how officials can respond on public forums such as social media and Front Porch Forum. Be patient, since these restrictions can make boards appear slow or uncommunicative.
- **Job descriptions.** Many local officials’ positions are defined by statute (town clerks, treasurers, selectboard members, town managers, and others), with legal deadlines they must fulfill. At certain times the town office may be much busier than others. Be aware of who is responsible for your topic of interest and be respectful of when and how their tasks are completed.
- **Existing plans and priorities.** Boards and committees already have short-term and long-term to-do lists. Any new idea will be most warmly received if you can show how the project dovetails with existing priorities and mandates. What skills does your group have, and what tasks are you willing to take on? Rather than adding to their workload, show how your group will support local officials’ ongoing efforts.
- **Budgetary considerations.** Often new ideas come with a price tag and possible budgetary implications. Be sure to address this when presenting your plan.

Recognize local officials’ history and interests.

- Be gracious regarding existing achievements on behalf of your community over time. Public buildings have been constructed, roads have been maintained, public lands set aside, projects completed – all with the leadership or support of local officials.
- Recognize that – like many who serve others – municipal officials often volunteer as part of their identity, sometimes built over generations of public service. New ideas, while well intentioned, may be perceived as challenges to long-held values or frameworks of personal meaning. This does not mean changes will be rejected; however, respectful framing will work in your favor. Rather than criticism, offer new ideas as constructive ways to build on past efforts and to benefit the community you all care about.

Principles of Project Management

Rather than a “to-do” list, this overview highlights elements that contribute to a successful project. Each project will be shaped by its people audience, funders, knowledge, and circumstances.

People Power.

People are key to successful projects. Who will drive your project forward? Some projects grow organically alongside a team or organization; others are guided by an established nonprofit or strong municipal leadership.

If you’re forming a new group, bring together people with diverse, complementary skills. Draw on expertise in your community and seek professional support when needed. Look for opportunities to build local skills along the way.

Give community members meaningful ways to contribute. Time, Talent, and Funding are all important to a successful project. Volunteers and small donors may grow into board members and larger donors, particularly when they feel personally connected to the project.

As a leader, consider your own strengths, limitations, and preferences—and how they fit with the people and project around you. Be clear about roles, but remain flexible as the work evolves.

Strong projects also begin with listening. Understand and incorporate the community’s fears, wants, needs, and ideas, and invite people with different perspectives into the work. The project will be stronger when a broad range of voices remains engaged throughout.

Know Your Project and Vision.

Once you have a team, gather information from people who have done similar work—both professionals and community volunteers. Ask what they learned, what challenges they encountered, and who helped them along the way. Keep track of contacts and organize what you learn in a shared document, spreadsheet, or binder.

At this stage, clarify your vision and outcomes:

- What inspired the project? What need, desire, or dream did the community identify?
- What will success look like? Describe the concrete outcomes.
- What are the ripple effects? Consider how the project will strengthen the broader community.
- What are the major phases? Breaking the project into big-picture steps makes the work more manageable and easier to communicate.

Together, these elements form the beginning of a case statement for bringing others on board.

Plan to Plan.

Planning takes time, may cost money, and often involves multiple disciplines. It is iterative, and larger projects generally require more layers of planning, longer timelines, and larger budgets. While it can be tempting to move quickly to implementation, solid planning is the foundation for long-term success. Begin with a few key exploratory tools:

- **Feasibility Studies:** Help answer “what’s possible,” and may include user surveys, building assessments, market research, traffic studies, or other project-specific analysis.
- **Initial Budgeting:** Estimate project costs and begin identifying funding needs. Your budget will evolve, but a grounded starting point leads to clearer fundraising goals and better funding decisions. See “Budgeting & Fundraising.”
- **Design Work:** Define what the finished project will look like and what it will take to get there. Depending on the project, this could mean architectural plans, trail design, program development, staffing, volunteer roles, or communications strategies.

The chapters in Part II – Advancing Community Projects – contain many examples, considerations, and suggestions to support this planning.

Keep Busy While the Work Unfolds.

Big projects take time. While longer-term planning and implementation are underway, test ideas on a small, temporary, or low-cost scale. These efforts can help you learn what works, build momentum, and keep people engaged. For example:

- A group hoping to reopen a general store might host a summer pop-up market or coffee hour with local farmers and producers.
- A group working toward new trails might organize walking or birding outings or volunteer trail-clearing days.

Small-scale efforts keep energy high, strengthen community connections, and help refine the vision while the larger project moves forward.

This is an abridged version of the principles presented in “Revitalizing Community and Historic Buildings.” For more on how these principles apply specifically to community building projects, see Part II.

Budgeting and Fundraising

Not everything costs money, but many community projects do – from building a playground to renovating an old building. Developing a budget and fundraising plan may seem daunting, but sharing the workload is an opportunity to engage and empower fellow community members.

Build a Budget.

Project budgets range from small volunteer efforts to multi-million dollar endeavors. If your project costs more than a few thousand dollars, seek support from a professional in the field or a technical assistance provider (an organization that provides free or low-cost expert guidance). They can help you estimate costs, match budgets to funding sources, and build accurate payment schedules.

Budgets fall into two main parts:

- **Uses / Expenses:** how the money is spent including physical materials, equipment, and soft costs (non-construction costs such as fees for studies, design, permits, legal review). Always include a contingency (a percentage-based buffer for unexpected costs). Some costs will have to be revised periodically.
- **Sources / Income:** where the money comes from including grants, donations, and loans. Some grants require a match (local funding to prove community support). Many funders allow in-kind donations (donated labor, professional services, or materials) to count toward this requirement. Keep strict records of volunteer hours.

Other budgeting factors to keep in mind include cash flow, funding diversity, and potential operating costs after development.

Sources and uses are linked. As you pay for expenses (uses), your available funds (sources) shrink. Payment schedules will help you know when bills are due versus when funds actually arrive. If a grant pays via reimbursement after work is completed, you may need a short-term loan to maintain cash flow (having enough cash on hand to pay workers and suppliers on time).

Projects usually need a mix of funding sources such as grants, bank loans, tax credit incentives, and private philanthropy (charitable gifts from individuals, local businesses, or foundations). Have a master budget but be prepared to create tailored budgets to meet the needs of different funders.

Consider whether you need both a Project Budget and an Annual or Operating Budget for maintenance. The Project Budget describes total costs and funds required to develop and complete a project over a specified period. The Annual Budget describes the annual costs to maintain the site, pay utilities, and keep the lights on. Keep operating expenses separate from project expenses because they require different kinds of fundraising and will gain support from different funders.

Let's say you are building a new playground; here are some basic questions to ask:

- What will be the cost of the equipment you need to begin construction?
- Material costs? What is the current rate for gravel, cement, steel, etc.?

- Transportation costs?
- Is there a need for preliminary excavation?
- Will you need to contract with experienced carpenters and welders? How much work can be done by volunteers?
- Are there costs associated with acquiring the land?
- Will any environmental analysis need to be conducted before construction begins?
- And so on...

You can see how for even a seemingly simple project, the list of expenses can grow quickly. It can be helpful to connect with experienced professionals in validating your figures. Check with local suppliers on material costs, for instance, and always request formal estimates from potential contractors.

Once you have a handle on the expense side of the budget, you have a fund development goal.

The Big Question: Funding.

The best question to help assess the potential funding landscape is “Who benefits, and who cares?” Think not only of the people in your community who care about the project today, but also of all those who *will* care when you communicate its importance and give them a share in the leadership and ownership of the project.

This Guide is filled with resources and partners who may be able to support your project. But funding is rarely “free,” so take the time to understand a potential funding source before launching into grant writing. Ask:

- Is it a good fit for the proposed work and the end use?
- How frequently is the funding available?
- Is it a reimbursement grant, or is there a matching requirement?
- Where do you need to be in the planning process in order to apply? To be competitive?
- What type of oversight is associated with funds? Do you need to do regular reporting?

Community groups typically shoulder much of the initial expenses to move the project from an “idea” to a clearly defined set of needs/outcomes. But once you know the project, it becomes easier to identify the right funding sources to support the work.

Local and state-level sources tend to be easier to access and administer than federal funding, but federal funding frequently comes with a larger pot of money. Know what you need and find the best (and easiest) source of funding to fit those needs.

Remember: Community fundraising is an essential part of most project budgets. Local dollars are the most flexible source of funding that can come in at any point in the project’s progress. They are a key source of early planning expenses, frequently help meet grant-matching requirements, and demonstrate a high level of community support.

One helpful lens through which to view the fund development process is to think about the relationships you’ll need to build to generate support. The success of your project depends on people giving gifts of all sizes and from all levels of familiarity. There is a

core circle of you and your dedicated team, people who already understand and are behind the effort. Then there are individuals who are probably supportive or will benefit, but they haven't heard about what you're doing or been asked to help yet. Lastly, more distant are the people, businesses, and local philanthropists who don't already see the need for your project but may be interested in supporting it. They will likely require more outreach and storytelling to cultivate their support.

To raise funds, you will need to raise awareness and start asking the community to contribute in any number of ways. You can organize a community potluck fundraiser, a bake sale, or musical event. Put a jar in the local store. Sell lottery tickets. Most efficiently, you can directly ask; mail or hand out a short brochure outlining the project accompanied by a stamped envelope to make it easy for them to give. If you have the capacity, members of the committee can deliver in-person requests to individuals or businesses. To keep building momentum, use a broad spectrum of communications channels – local traditional media partnerships, letters to your paper, community web pages, personalized calls and emails, social media platforms, etc. – or you may decide to target your search towards a few key sponsors.

Here are some guidelines when thinking about your pitch:

- People give to people.
- People give when asked by someone they know – the more personal the request, the better. If you send 1,000 emails asking for support, you might get 5 donations. Making 1,000 letters or phone calls? Maybe 300. Take all 1,000 people out to lunch, and by the end you might have 750 donations.
- It's important to acknowledge that some people have more resources to give than others, so ask each potential supporter to donate within their ability. You can imagine tiers of support as a pyramid:
 - At the base are the many people who care and can give small gifts. Their support shows buy-in and impact, and they bring in the most by way of human capital.
 - The middle tier may be made up of only a tenth as many people as in the bottom tier, but their total monetary contribution may exceed that group. With good relationship-building, this support can be fairly reliable year-to-year.
 - The top of the pyramid contains even fewer people, but for many projects, the lead donors may cover half the cost or more! This is why it's important to build relationships with local philanthropists who may set an example.

Frame a plan that describes the ways you plan to ask for money, including names of the people, businesses, philanthropists or agencies that you will approach. Bring this plan to your working committee for review. Then, once you have agreed on any changes, figure out an equitable division of the labor. Sometimes it can be useful to conduct in-person visits in pairs, with one of you taking the lead on describing the project, and the other there to make the actual request.

A couple of thoughts on asking for money.

You are never begging – you are offering someone an opportunity to do something for the common good. That person benefits by contributing to the community and to something bigger than themselves. In a way, it becomes part of their legacy.

Always be respectful. Avoid making any judgement before or after the request, regardless of their decision. Any other attitude will hurt your effort and your relationships in the community.

When meeting a potential donor, share the story, ask for what you need (with businesses or larger donors it's best to give them a dollar figure), and then be quiet. Don't try to describe all the reasons the donor might not want to give. Relax. Give them time to share their thoughts or advice on your project, and to consider what they can and want to do. Don't leave without asking, though; and before you leave, be sure you understand what they will commit to.

Mock Playground Budget.

As an example, let's look at what a budget for building a playground might look like.

EXPENSES

\$ 5,000	- Excavation and Leveling the Ground
22,000	- Plastic Play Structures
8,000	- Gazebo Wood and Materials
4,600	- Carpentry (150 hours at \$32/hr.)
<u>2,000</u>	- Trees, Bushes and Grass Seed
\$41,600	- Total Expenses

INCOME

\$ 6,000	- Small donations (under \$100)
14,000	- Business Contributions
10,000	- Grants
10,000	- Leadership Donor
<u>1,600</u>	- Barbeque Fundraiser
\$41,600	- Total Income

The income side of your budget sets categorical funding targets for you to work towards. When you and your team look at a budget like this, you may get ideas: Is there a garden store in town that might contribute trees and bushes? Is there a farmer with a backhoe who might do the excavation as a contribution?

Be confident. Budgeting and fundraising have built great things all around you. People will be glad to be a part of your project.

And to the most important question of who benefits and who cares? In the above example, the children in your community are the ones that benefit, and so everyone cares. Be proud to ask for their partnership and support!

Community Engagement Resources

A wide variety of organizations offer resources to support inclusive, high-quality community engagement. Listed below are just a few. This list is a work in progress. For additional resources, or to suggest additions to this list, visit vtrural.org/guide/.

Accessibility

Plainfield's Accessibility Committee Guide is a good example of what local volunteer and municipal groups can do to make their events and structures accessible to community members with disabilities. Search the Plainfield VT website for the guide: plainfieldvt.gov.

The Vermont Center for Independent Living is a good source of information on inclusive language and offers technical assistance to implement the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and disability-related regulations. vcil.org.

Disability Rights Vermont has resources explaining your rights as a person with disabilities. disabilityrightsvt.org.

Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) has information on a variety of programs and services available to Vermonters. dail.vermont.gov.

The Massachusetts Office on Disability offers a variety of tools for effective communication under ADA requirements, creating accessible digital documents, and other practical guidance. mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-office-on-disability.

ADA National Network provides this guide for making community events accessible, what to look out for and possible solutions to common barriers. adata.org.

Accessibility Services

American Sign Language (ASL) Interpretation is a visual language used primarily by the Deaf and hard-of-hearing communities in the U.S. and Canada. ASL interpreters are available both in person and virtually. ASL interpretation services normally need several weeks' advance notice to cover a meeting or event. Vancro Integrated Interpretation Services is one option for events, vancroiis.com.

Live Captioning means that a professional captioner is writing captions in real time. Live captions, also known as Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART), are considered the gold standard for captioning—different from AI captions which can have many errors. Captioning requests need to be made several weeks in advance for meetings and events. One option in Vermont is White Coat Captioning, whitecoatcaptioning.com.

Assistive Technology can improve an individual's quality of life and/or increase accessibility at a meeting or event. Examples: personal hearing amplifiers, magnifiers for visually impaired, and other devices. Vermont Assistive Technology Program (VATP)

loans equipment free of charge to individuals. VATP also provides information and resources about assistive technology to organizations. atp.vermont.gov.

Language Translation Services. U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) provides in-person interpretation in Vermont and remote interpretation and translation services nationwide. To request an interpreter, go to refugees.org/uscri-vermont. Community groups or organizations can also request interpretation services from AALV, a Vermont nonprofit that provides a number of services to new Americans in Vermont. Find out more at aalv-vt.org.

Language Access Planning. Understanding how to serve the language access needs of your community is key to effective and equitable communication. Meeting these diverse needs, including translation and interpretation, requires advance planning and budgeting. See the Vermont Office of Racial Equity's "Introduction to Language Access Planning" at racialequity.vermont.gov and the appendices of their comprehensive 2023 Language Access Report for resources.

Hybrid Meeting and Live-Streaming Support. Local community media centers serve many regions of Vermont and offer hybrid meeting support and live streaming of public meetings. The Vermont Access Network is a coalition of 24 community media centers serving the needs of communities for government, public, and educational access using technology tools and training to improve civic life. vermontaccess.net.

Readability Tools. A number of free online tools are available to review your text for clarity and readability. Useful in reviewing your outreach and educational materials, these tools can highlight complex sentences or difficult words, and evaluate the grade-level readability of your materials. Examples include Hemingway Editor hemingwayapp.com and Readability Formulas readabilityformulas.com/ or use these guides to help you write in plain language digital.gov.

Accessibility of Web Content. The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) offers guidance to governments on making web content and mobile apps accessible: ada.gov. You can use tools like Accessible Web accessibleweb.com/ and WAVE wave.webaim.org/ as a starting point.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The Vermont Office of Racial Equity partners with federal, state, and local governments, as well as community-based groups and other entities to advance equity by providing training, policy guidance, and research. racialequity.vermont.gov/.

The Roots Social Justice Center provides physically and financially accessible space to support and bring together communities working for social justice. therootsjc.org.

Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity is a training and consulting service with the social mission of making Vermont a desirable destination for all, particularly outdoor enthusiasts, tourists, conventioners, college students, entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists of color. vermontpartnership.org.

Abundant Sun provides strategic planning to organizations on organizational culture and leadership and has deep expertise in DEI training and support for businesses and non-profits. abundantsun.com.

The Vermont Center for Independent Living works to promote dignity, independence and the civil rights of Vermonters with disabilities. They can provide consultation around accessibility and practical assistance for interpreting and implementing the Americans with Disabilities Act and other Civil Rights laws. vcil.org.

CQ Strategies provides training and consultation to organizations, businesses, and individuals focused on equity, cultural proficiency, and social justice work. cqstrategies.org.

The Association of Africans Living in Vermont helps new Americans from all parts of the world gain independence in their new communities through a range of integration services bridging case management, workforce development, behavioral health awareness, and interpreter services programming. aav-vt.org.

The Clemmons Family Farm in Charlotte is one of 17 farms in Vermont owned and operated by a family of color. They offer a number of programs forwarding a multi-cultural vision Vermont and that dive into the rich history of the African-American and African diaspora. clemmonsfamilyfarm.org.

Inclusive Public Engagement

Strengthening and Sustaining Public Engagement: A Planning Guide for Communities offers insights and tools to help Vermont communities examine and improve their public engagement processes, publicagenda.org.

Best Practices for Meaningful Community Engagement Tip Sheet offers suggestions for involving historically underrepresented populations, based on Groundwork USA's work in multi-cultural community development initiatives, groundworkusa.org.

Community Engagement Resources and a wide variety of tools are available from the Municipal Research and Service Center (MRSC) of Washington State. mrsc.org.

Resource Guide on Public Engagement includes the "Core Principles of Public Engagement" and other foundational content created by the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD). ncdd.org.

Climate Justice and Equity tools are necessary due to historic underinvestment in rural communities, economic inequality, and racism. The Climate Action Office at the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources offers resources including the Climate Toolkit, a searchable local and regional climate planning hub. climatechange.vermont.gov.

Connecting People to Power report from a coalition of Vermont groups to the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation provides guidance on equitable public participation and community engagement. wholecommunities.org.

The Vermont **Office of Racial Equity** partners with federal, state, and local governments, as well as community-based groups and other entities to advance equity by providing training, policy guidance, and research. racialequity.vermont.gov/.

Explore additional resources in “Including Diverse Leadership and Participation in Community Processes.”

Dealing with Conflict

Good Conflict Starter Toolkit is a free downloadable guide created by *High Conflict* author Amanda Ripley. It includes practical tips and resources for making conflict productive rather than destructive, including “Six Counterintuitive Moves for Healthy Conflict.” thegoodconflict.com.

Better Conflict Skill Building is online training content created by the Conflict Transformation Collaborative of Middlebury College including a “Self-Awareness Conflict Styles” self-assessment, videos, handouts, and other resources. middlebury.edu.

Open Meeting Law

Vermont’s Open Meeting Law (1 V.S.A. §§ 310-314) is intended to make government transparent and accountable. It pertains to public bodies such as state boards, selectboards and school boards, and includes requirements about public notice, access, participation, and records. For more details, see:

Vermont Secretary of State, sos.vermont.gov.

Vermont League of Cities and Towns, vlct.org.

Evaluation and Impact Assessment

Systematically evaluating the impacts of your initiatives can help ensure you address the real issues, use the most effective and equitable approaches, engage diverse audiences, and enhance future success. The Office of Racial Equity’s Impact Assessment Tool can help guide this process. racialequity.vermont.gov.



II. Advancing Community Projects

With the engagement tools from Part 1 in hand, you're ready to move from how we work together to what we build together. This section focuses on turning shared vision into action: setting priorities, forming groups or committees, managing projects, and developing budgets and fundraising plans. The inclusive, community-centered practice tools introduced earlier will support any initiative or project your community chooses to take on. In Part II you will find project-specific action ideas and resources to help move those priorities forward. By applying tools from Part 1 to real projects that strengthen your town's future, we hope you will find the same success that towns just like yours have achieved. This section also includes a few stories from communities across Vermont that have come together and turned local ideas into progress for their town. Their experiences show what is possible when neighbors commit to shared goals and take collective action.

ACTION STEPS & RESOURCES

This section serves as a practical how-to manual for local leaders advancing community projects. Based on 20 years of VCRD engagements, it highlights common priority projects that communities have successfully initiated and accomplished. Each chapter outlines the action steps, expert advice, and resources from state, federal, non-profit, and private-sector partners. These tools are offered as starting points for action that local teams can use or adapt to fit their circumstances. Because projects often overlap, chapters are grouped by topic area. If you are building trails, for example, explore the surrounding chapters for additional relevant information. The overall sections include:

- Community and Natural Spaces
- Economic and Community Vitality
- Infrastructure
- Civic Engagement and Community Connections
- Youth, Families, and Wellbeing
- Climate & Emergency Resilience

Community and Natural Spaces



Advance Outdoor Recreation and Trails

It's no surprise that in the beautiful Green Mountain State, many communities have identified trails and outdoor recreation as a great way to connect. Whether you're interested in hiking, biking, river access, skiing, snowmobiling, ATVs, or other activities, here are some tips that have been effective in creating and maintaining trails and boosting the recreation economy across Vermont.

ACTION STEPS

1. Create an outdoor recreation and trails committee.

Begin by talking with existing groups whose interests might overlap with an outdoor recreation and trails team (town planning and conservation commission, regional trails and conservation groups). Ask how your work can most effectively connect with theirs.

Recruit members for the group by identifying and inviting community members who could contribute skills and information. You'll need a variety of skills and everyone has something to contribute, from identifying interested landowners, to planning and coordination, to mapping, to actually getting out tools and building trails.

Work with the group to agree on your shared goals and initiatives for the committee. Even if the committee was specifically formed around a pre-identified project, make sure everyone agrees on the committee's purpose and priorities.

Identify if your group will serve as an unofficial or ad-hoc group or committee, be a chapter of a regional outdoor recreation organization, work with a local nonprofit, become an official municipal committee (see "Fostering Strong Municipal-Community Partnerships") or take some other structure.

2. Gather data on community interests, needs, and assets.

A survey of relevant community members (residents, schools, youth, second homeowners, visitors) can help you identify recreational interests and needs. This survey could focus on a specific project or could ask broader questions to help you identify priorities. If you use an online survey, make paper copies available for those who don't use the internet.

Build on previous efforts. Roll out maps, revisit past trail plans, and bring in local leaders and the resources listed at the end of this chapter who can help you understand past efforts. Even if projects weren't completed, you can learn from their experience, and you likely will gain appreciation for past efforts.

Know your strengths. Drawing on the experience of local groups and community members, conduct an inventory of existing trails and recreational opportunities.

Consult trail users. Identify and engage various user groups, both formal and informal (hikers, ATV and snowmobile riders, bikers, paddlers). Don't forget other groups that may have an interest (schools, youth, business owners, municipal leadership). If there are statewide or regional trails in your community, connect with the groups that oversee them (e.g. The Green Mountain Club, the Catamount Trail Association, the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, and others).

3. Formulate and implement an action plan.

Based on the information you've gathered, build an action plan and timeline for the group's priorities. The plan should include:

- Identifying and recruiting volunteers and/or contractors who will lead project implementation.
- Identifying technical experts to map the project. This may also include other trail resources in the community, or a map of the specific project.
- If relevant, include a strategy to engage and build trust with landowners. This may include creating information packages to use in building understanding of your group and its goals. This will be especially necessary where an easement or permission is needed.
- Working with experts and resource groups (see suggestions below) to identify potential funding opportunities and develop a funding/fund raising plan for next steps.

For process ideas, see "Setting Priorities for Action."

4. Communicate, engage, share and celebrate.

Develop signage for your specific project and/or for town recreational assets to create a comprehensive system that highlights, shares, and celebrates local recreational assets.

Share maps and information broadly to build public engagement and interest. Some strategies may include:

- Creating a website, brochures, or community calendar that provide information about recreational opportunities.
- Developing a strategy to "brand and promote" your town's recreation opportunities
- Coordinating with local businesses and the welcome center to share recreation information with visitors.
- Hosting a town cleanup day on appropriate sites.
- Cultivating a list of community recreation volunteers — to coordinate programming and trail maintenance.
- Holding community trails events and other outings for all ages to bring the community together, do some trail or other maintenance and draw attention to and celebrate outdoor recreation assets.

For additional outreach ideas, see "Communicating with the Community."

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Vermont CORE Toolkit – Vermont Community Outdoor Recreation Economy Toolkit is a resource that helps communities identify their recreation assets, engage with businesses, and plan for their community goals by providing a framework for collecting, organizing, and sharing out data and stories. vtcoretoolkit.com/

The Vermont Mountain Bike Association (VMBA) can help the development of mountain bike trails and support the organization of a local chapter. If a local chapter exists, connect directly with them. Find out if there is a local chapter at ymba.org.

The Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation can provide guidance and technical support for trail development and improvement, especially on public lands. fpr.vermont.gov.

Your Regional Planning Commission could help with mapping and planning for outdoor recreation and trails. Find the one for your area here: vapda.org/.

If the work is in an area near or in the National Forest, the U.S. National Forest Service can be an important partner. Regional offices are located in Rutland, Manchester, and Rochester. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r09/gmfl>.

The Vermont Trails and Greenways Council represents most trail organizations in the state and partners with the Vermont Recreation and Parks Association on an annual conference. vermonttgc.org/ and vrpa.org/.

The Vermont Youth Conservation Corp can be a resource to support trail building and development. vycc.org.

The Vermont Land Trust could help with recreation project development and/or public land conservation or acquisition. To find your regional contact, visit vlt.org/contact.

The Vermont Trail Finder project is a statewide, free, trail-manager-approved mapping tool for Vermont trails. trailfinder.info

The Vermont Urban and Community Forestry Program provides technical assistance for towns that are protecting, maintaining, or acquiring community forests. They have a toolkit for public engagement and planning around public forests and recreation. vtcommunityforestry.org.

For river access or other river-related projects, the Vermont River Conservancy could be a partner. vermontriverconservancy.org.

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail is a resource for questions and support around riverfront recreational access. northernforestcanoetrail.org.

The Trust for Public Land can provide technical assistance and connect with grant funding to make public land more accessible. tpl.org.

The Vermont ATV Sportsman's Association has access to state funding and can offer expertise for all aspects of trail planning, land easements, regulatory assistance, trail management and safety. vtvasa.org.

The National Park Service "Rivers and Trails" Program helps groups well beyond the parks themselves plan, map and develop trails. nps.gov/ncrc/programs/rtca/index.html.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscric-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation.

- Recreation Trail Program grants could be used to assess trail conditions, maintenance and for capital improvements: fpr.vermont.gov/recreational-trails-program.
- The Land and Water Conservation Fund: fpr.vermont.gov/land-and-water-conservation-fund.

Lake Champlain Basin Program, a Champlain Valley Natural Heritage Partnership committee, helps direct grant opportunities and funding for recreational projects. lcbp.org/.

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board offers Public Outdoor Recreation Grants. vhcb.org.

USDA Rural Development has a variety of grant and loan programs available to support community infrastructure including signage, community facilities or trails. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

The Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) has a Bike and Pedestrian Grant Program. vtrans.vermont.gov.

The Northern Border Regional Commission could fund major recreation development projects, especially with economic development potential. nbrc.gov.

Vermont Housing Conservation Board has funding to help local groups hire grant writers to fund community and economic development projects. vhcb.org/redi.

The Department of Buildings and General Services offers Building Communities Grant Programs that could support recreational facility improvements in Vermont communities. bgs.vermont.gov.

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. You can search the Vermont Foundations Directory using keywords like "recreation" "conservation" "youth" or other words that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area. Find the database here: fconline.foundationcenter.org/.

Cause IQ maintains a directory of Vermont-based grantmaking foundations. Visit causeiq.com/directory/foundations-list/vermont-state.

Outdoor recreation examples across VT

The Bristol Trail Network bristolrecclub.org/bristol-trail-network.

Ridgeline Outdoor Collective would be an excellent model as they worked through connection with the National Forest: ridgelineoutdoorcollective.org.

Ascutney Outdoors ascutneyoutdoors.org.

Bennington Area Trail System (BATS) batsvt.org.



BRADFORD: Skate Park and Youth Engagement

Bradford shows how youth voice, paired with patient, persistent leadership, can turn a five-year vision into lasting public investment. At the 2021 Bradford Community Visit, young people named a skatepark as a priority, and the community agreed. A dedicated group formed to build consensus over the long haul, starting small with a dog park and a temporary skate ramp to build momentum and prove demand. Recognizing that young people needed to help shape a park built for them, the group made youth recruitment a priority, adapting committee structures so youth could help lead outreach and speak at Town Meeting. That sustained engagement paid off: in 2026, Bradford won a competitive \$400,000 Land and Water Conservation Fund grant, then secured the required 50% match at Town Meeting. Construction will begin in 2027.

Lesson: Youth leadership takes real investment and small early wins build the trust needed for big, long-term goals.



Build A Community Park or Green Space

Nothing says summer in Vermont like an outdoor venue where the community can gather. And of course these public spaces can be enjoyed during fall foliage, snowy adventures, and spring outings as well. Whether your community is dreaming of a recreation space, a public garden, a concert venue, or another public space, it is useful to consider the steps listed below.

ACTION STEPS

1. Build a team.

Establish a community park or green space team or committee. Invite community members, outdoor enthusiasts, business leaders and town officials with a variety of perspectives and expertise. (For tips, see “Inviting the Public”).

Initially, team members can collaborate on the research and project prioritization described in the next steps. Once established, the group could also take on:

- **Community outreach:** Create a comprehensive communications plan and strategize ways to keep the community informed and involved in the park development process.
- **Fund Development:** Budget new initiatives and connect with potential sources of funding.
- **Permits and Regulations:** Navigate the legal conditions necessary for development, and partner with the municipality to ensure local zoning standards are met.

2. Take stock: What’s here, what’s working, and what’s not?

Inventory what parks or other outdoor spaces currently exist in the community, and how they are being utilized. You can use a variety of research tools:

- **Distribute a public survey** (both paper and online). List existing parks and outdoor community spaces and ask respondents to evaluate how satisfied they are with these. Leave space for them to list additional places you might not have considered. Ask what types of space they would like to see in the future, and whether they have ideas for new locations.
- **Connect with your local recreation committee/department** if you have one. They may have valuable information on current usage, as well as expertise to lend on upkeep and design.
- **Consult with local clubs or recreation groups** to learn of their priorities.
- **Check your town plan** to see whether and how parks and green spaces are prioritized.

What community groups or organizations currently utilize and/or maintain existing green spaces, and how? Would any of them be potential sponsors or partners for future expansion?

Research any past efforts to develop community green spaces. If they were successful, what were the keys to their success? If not, what were the major impediments?

Are current parks and outdoor spaces accessible to all community members? Are there any populations who can't use existing spaces due to physical accessibility, entry fees, or other barriers? How could future projects improve public access?

3. Identify project and location.

Based on your research and the ideas gathered from the community, identify the type of community green space you want to develop, and the qualities it should have. Is it a park? A community recreational space? A public garden? An outdoor music venue?

Solicit ideas from the public about various design options. A great way to generate engagement at this stage is to host a facilitated public workshop. Here, interested community members help refine and augment the ideas gathered in the community survey. The workshop can result in a set of recommendations for the core committee's final review. See "Setting Priorities for Action."

Will you be revitalizing an existing public park or green space?

- This option is often easier than constructing a new one from scratch; logistical and legal hurdles are fewer, and the cost is lower.
- If the property you hope to redesign is currently publicly owned, partnership with the municipality will be key. Work with your local planning department to identify parcels that are currently underutilized and improvements that could be made for maximum impact.

Will you be building a new park or greenspace?

- In this case, it can be helpful to partner with a local real estate professional or inspector to obtain help with the process of property evaluation and purchase.
- Be sure to thoroughly vet all parcels for environmental or physical hazards, and conduct an in-depth analysis of past ownership.
- Consider site location, accessibility and ease of access for transit-dependent populations, as well as proximity to local businesses and public amenities like Wi-Fi and restrooms.

4. Develop a budget and funding plan.

Determine the ownership structure for the proposed community space. Will it be municipally-owned (and maintained), or is it a privately-owned property available for public use? There are advantages and disadvantages to both options.

- If the space is to be municipally owned, it may be possible to fund some of the development through a public bond or by leveraging a local options tax. Both of these actions necessitate a town vote and thorough public outreach and involvement.

- Alternatively, a non-profit entity can be created to own and operate the space. This option allows for more independence in decision making. However, it precludes certain funding sources, and usually necessitates the establishment of a governing board.

Whatever ownership structure you decide, it is important to connect to state agencies and philanthropic advisors early on in the process (see resources section below).

It can be helpful to divide the budgeting process into two phases: 1) (re)development and 2) ongoing operations, since funding sources for each phase may vary.

For more on finances, see “Budgeting and Fundraising.”

5. Understand the legal conditions for development.

Depending on the site chosen and the extent of redevelopment planned, it will probably be necessary to communicate with state and federal agencies to navigate the regulatory landscape of the project. Your regional planning commission can be an important partner in helping to connect to the appropriate partners, and completing required paperwork.

6. Celebrate, communicate, and involve the community.

Large-scale, extensive revitalization or development can take years to complete and may be confusing for the public to follow. It is vital to communicate regularly about your progress, celebrate incremental successes, and work actively to maintain community interest and involvement in the project.

- Post regular updates on the development process through municipal communications channels, social media platforms, and in partnerships with local traditional media. (For tips, see “Communicating with the Community”).
- Ask local champions to write letters of support and post them in newspapers and on community listservs or local forums.
- Much of the construction work may be done by experienced contractors, but there will also be opportunities for hands-on community participation. Use your communications plan to put out a call to the community for help. Hosting a community workday, organizing specific tasks for both skilled and unskilled volunteers, can be a great way to build enthusiasm and might defray some labor costs.
- Partner with local food vendors and musical talent to make workdays lively community events. Be sure to gather participant contact information to build a list of volunteers and supporters.
- Collaborate with a broad array of community organizations and social groups to brainstorm uses for your park/greenspace. Engage with local artists and creative leaders about the possibility of public installations or performances.
- Connect with local schools to identify areas for integration with local curriculum.
- Be sure park events are included in your community events calendar.
- Once the project is complete, host a kickoff event to celebrate the project and thank everyone involved. Invite the community, people from neighboring towns, and the media. This can be a great opportunity to highlight programs or events scheduled for the new greenspace.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Local conservation partners could be helpful in supporting this work. A community group could reach out individually, or invite them to a meeting to discuss the project. This may include:

- Vermont Rivers Conservancy. vermontriverconservancy.org.
- Vermont Land Trust. Find the right contact for your region here: vlt.org/contact
- Vermont Nature Conservancy. nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/vermont.
- Trust for Public Land. tpl.org/our-work/vermont.
- Your Regional Planning Commission could help with planning, mapping, and identifying funding opportunities. Find the RPC for your region here: vapda.org/.

The Urban and Community Forestry Program could provide technical assistance and a detailed toolkit that can help to develop local green spaces. vtcommunityforestry.org.

The Vermont Youth Conservation Corps sometimes partners with communities to help design and build outdoor projects. vycc.org.

The Vermont Recreation and Parks Association (VRPA) could be a resource for learning from other community parks management professionals around the state. vrpa.org.

Your County Forester can be a partner in any project that involves tree planting, forest conservation, or your local Town Forest. Find your County Forester here: fpr.vermont.gov/forest/list-vermont-county-foresters.

Check in with your county forester or a botanist around selection of ornamental trees, bushes, or other plantings. They can help find species that are suited to the location and that won't pose any ecological risks. The UVM Extension Master Gardener program may be a good place to look for assistance uvm.edu/extension/mastergardener.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

The VT Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has several grant programs that could help to support community park or green space development. Search for Municipal Planning Grants and the Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP) at accd.vermont.gov/community-development. In addition, the Designated Centers for Community Investment (formerly the Vermont Designated Downtown and Village Center Programs) could help access funds or tax credits.

Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation. Search for the following, and other grant programs, at fpr.vermont.gov/recreation/recreation-grants:

- Recreation Trail Program (RTP) grants could be used to assess trail conditions, maintenance and for capital improvements.
- The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is available for parks, playgrounds, pools and other outdoor recreation infrastructure.

The VT Department of Buildings and General Services offers a Recreational Facilities Grant program that could help to support parks, playgrounds, and other community facilities. bgs.vermont.gov/commissioner/building-communities-grants.

USDA Rural Development has a Community Facilities Grant Program that could support initiatives in this arena. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

The New England Grassroots Environment Fund might be a small funding source for seeding community projects. grassrootsfund.org.

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board may have grant funding available to support local conservation and recreation initiatives. vhcb.org/our-programs/conservation.

Cause IQ maintains a directory of Vermont-based grantmaking foundations. There are many private foundations in Vermont that fund education and youth-related initiatives. You can search using keywords like “recreation” “conservation” “youth” or other words that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area. causeiq.com/directory/foundations-list/vermont-state/.

See “Advance Outdoor Recreation and Trails” for additional resource ideas.

NORWICH: Community Grange

Norwich demonstrates how community leadership can turn a threatened historic asset into a vision for a new community resource. In 2023, a small group concerned about the deteriorating Grange building reached out to Grange members to explore what could be done. The Grange ultimately decided to transfer the building to a nonprofit that could renovate and maintain it while preserving the Grange’s ability to meet there in perpetuity. The Norwich Community Collaborative was formed to take on the building and work with the community to shape its future. A conditions assessment through Preservation Trust of Vermont gave the group the information and confidence to move forward, laying the groundwork for a \$1.75 million, three-phase renovation. The Collaborative has articulated a clear vision and defined outcomes: a thriving, accessible community center; an energy-efficient renovation that preserves the Grange’s historic character; and a space for food, arts, culture, and community connection.

Lesson: Community assets can find new life when local leaders build a clear shared vision, seek the expertise needed to understand what is possible, and create structures capable of sustaining that vision.



Create Community Gathering Spaces

Some communities want to provide a gathering place for seniors; others want to serve youth and families. Still others are seeking a multi-use gathering place to learn, create art, maintain health and fitness, support small businesses, or pursue other common interests. Across Vermont, different communities have taken the following steps (not always in this order) to help realize their vision for a community center.

Action Steps

1. Collaborate on a common vision.

Reach out to individuals and existing community groups who might be interested in developing a community center. Build a project leadership team that can solicit ideas on existing community programs, current needs, and the potential of a new community center. Together, your team might:

- Meet with local leaders and social service providers
- Host a series of community conversations or public forums to engage as many sectors of the community as possible. Work thoughtfully to engage with people who might not feel comfortable in existing community spaces. See “Inviting the Public.”
- Distribute a public survey (print and online) to solicit input

Synthesize this public input into a “wish list” for the community center. These items may not all be possible, but they can be used to guide feasibility analysis.

For more ideas, see “Developing a Community Vision.”

2. Determine the structure and function of the community center.

Using the public input as a guide, determine the key functions that a community center would play in the community. Is it a recreation center, a senior center, a youth center, a place for events, activities, meals, or services?

Identify community partnerships that could be leveraged to increase usage and public benefit of the space. Is there a local recreation program that could collaborate? Are there local senior programs, exercise classes, or a business incubator program that could use the space?

Determine a structure to fund and manage a community center. In some towns, community centers are owned and managed by the municipality. In others, the centers are managed by an independent non-profit or business. What’s right for your community?

For techniques to help identify key interests, see “Setting Priorities for Action.”

3. Renovate or Build?

Based on the community's desires and the available building stock, decide whether to renovate an existing structure or begin new construction. Some communities hire a community development consultant to help gather ideas from the public, conduct a feasibility study, and navigate other logistics of development.

For a renovation:

- Inventory existing under-utilized facilities in town. Determine if there are spaces available to meet the community's needs and the desired function of the center.
- Once a site is selected, get a skilled appraisal of upgrades necessary to meet code. Consider structural integrity, plumbing, electrical, insulation, heating, lead exposure, and accessibility.

For new construction:

- Consider consulting an experienced developer or architect, both in designing the structure and budgeting the construction process.
- Draft clear and detailed drawings that will help the community get a sense of what is proposed and provide their ideas and suggestions.

4. Organize to advance your project.

Establish a project committee and a regular meeting schedule. Subcommittees or working groups might include:

- **Communication and Engagement:** Responsible for getting the word out and engaging the public on this effort. Communication should be open, two-way, and continue throughout every step of the process (see "Communicating with the Community").
- **Fund Development:** Responsible for creating a budget, doing capital planning, and finding funding. This group might do community fundraising, and apply for state, federal, or foundation grants. They might also hire a fundraising consultant. (See "Budgeting and Fundraising").
- **Programming:** Responsible for planning what will happen at the community center. Ideas include an opening celebration and an initial calendar of events.

5. Develop a business and operating plan.

Meet with other public and private community youth, and senior centers around the state to learn more about their governance structures and models for sustainability.

Plan how the community center will sustain itself over the long term. Will the center charge a fee for services (e.g. space rental)? A membership program? What fundraising will occur on an ongoing basis?

Determine what resources the municipality can contribute (e.g. snow removal?). Will the community center receive an annual contribution from the municipal budget?

Decide how grant funds and donations will be allocated to specific programs.

Create a governance and management structure for the new center. Will there be a Board of Directors? An executive manager? Will the center have employees?

Develop a clear and concise marketing plan to pitch to investors.

6. Implement, communicate, and celebrate.

Once funding is secured and plans are in place, work with contractors and consultants to complete renovation or construction.

Build programming when ready.

Develop printed materials to post around town with information about the center and programs available.

Develop a comprehensive, easy-to-update and user-friendly website with a list of programs and schedule of events.

Host an opening day celebration for the community. Invite everyone!

Foster ongoing local interest in the center to infuse the space with community energy. For instance:

- Engage community volunteer groups and assess their capacity to provide ongoing support towards the maintenance and operation of the building.
- Hold community workdays to celebrate the center and engage in cleaning, painting, planting, or other improvements to the building and grounds.
- Consider encouraging the use of the community center for potlucks, birthday parties, and other social gatherings.

Additional Considerations for Specific Gathering Spaces:

Youth Centers:

Engage youth in leadership from the beginning. The group could create a Youth Steering Committee and

designate adult “staff” to support. This steering committee of youth and community leadership could work together to formulate a vision for the youth center. This vision could be used to request planning funds and grants to assess and evaluate location and properties for the Center. See “Engaging Youth: A Key to Community Vitality” for additional ideas.

The group could host a youth forum to engage on ideas and what specific kinds of activities they are looking for.

Recreation Centers:

The Vermont Recreation and Parks Association (ignore) could be a resource for learning from other recreation programs around the state and connecting with other volunteers

and professionals. vrpa.org. Your group could consider joining the VRPA to utilize helpful tools and connect with other recreation programs around the state.

Start with an inventory of the indoor and outdoor recreation assets, arts programs and groups, and available facilities in your town as well as in neighboring communities. A community survey of residents, second homeowners, and visitors could be a way to identify recreational interests. Once the survey is complete, an inventory could be conducted to identify whether and where the resources are available to meet preferred needs and develop programs and facilities.

Consider adding recreation staff to your town.

Co-Working Spaces:

Engage local remote workers, home-based businesses, and entrepreneurs from the beginning. A small working group could host a listening session or meet-and-greet to gather ideas about what kinds of workspaces, privacy, technology, and support people need. This group could also begin building a contact list of potential users and partners to help shape the vision and validate demand.

Inventory existing work and meeting spaces in town and in nearby communities. Identify co-working spaces within a reasonable distance, as well as cafés, libraries, and other public venues that already offer WiFi and informal work areas. This inventory can help determine whether collaboration with an existing facility could meet community needs or whether a new space is warranted.

Assess the financial and technological requirements early. Co-working spaces often require significant investment in connectivity, automated access systems, and day-to-day technical management. A clear understanding of start-up and operating costs can help determine whether municipal support, partnerships, or grants will be needed to stabilize the model.

Explore different co-working models to match community needs. Options might include a shared office hub, a maker-space, an entrepreneurial incubator, or a hybrid model that blends several functions. Identifying an anchor tenant or long-term lease partner could help ensure steady usage and revenue.

Evaluate underutilized buildings as potential sites. A feasibility assessment of available spaces can help determine which locations offer the right mix of infrastructure, layout, accessibility, and opportunities for shared amenities.

Build visibility and membership before opening. Develop a clear description of the value the space will offer. The group could host pop-up workdays, small business pitch sessions, or community demonstrations to generate interest. Local newsletters, social media, and partnerships with the chamber of commerce could help spread the word and begin building a membership base.

Co-Working in Vermont is a detailed and comprehensive guide to help you get started. You can download it here: vcet.co/coworking-in-vermont-a-starter-guide/.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

The Vermont Small Business Development Center could help with Business Plan development. vtsbdc.org.

If the project would involve the renovation and preservation of an historic building, the Preservation Trust of Vermont could be a key partner for consultation, project development assistance, fiscal counseling and potential grant support if a building is over fifty years old. ptvermont.org.

The Vermont Division for Historic Preservation could also provide information about how to rehabilitate and use historic buildings, and provide information about any financial resources available for that purpose. accd.vermont.gov/historic-preservation.

If the Center you are developing focuses on youth, Vermont Afterschool has developed a detailed guide to support communities that are developing a youth/teen center and they can also provide technical assistance and help you connect to other youth centers in the state. Find their guide and other resources at vermontafterschool.org.

The Vermont Arts Exchange, located in Bennington, performs a lot of the functions listed above. They serve as an arts collaboration space for adults and youth. They run summer and after school youth programs, as well as a performing arts space. <http://vtartxchange.org/>

The National Business Incubator Association (NBIA) is an excellent resource on the current state and success of incubators. There are many ways to structure an incubator, private, public, non-profit, for profit, university partner or not, NBIA is a great resource to start reading and learning. nbia.org.

VT Center for Emerging Technologies offers technical support and advice. vcet.co.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscric-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

The Vermont Community Foundation may have funding to support a community center project. vermontcf.org.

The Vermont Department of Buildings and General Services has a Building Communities grant program that can fund community facilities projects. bgs.vermont.gov/commissioner/building-communities-grants.

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development has several grant programs that could support both feasibility and planning efforts as well as building and implementation. accd.vermont.gov/community-development.

USDA Rural Development provides grants to support community facilities. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

Vermont Housing Conservation Board

- Conservation Grants: these grants help groups in planning and renovation of existing buildings. vhcb.org/conservation/conservation-applications-funding-programs/.
- REDI Grants: this funding helps local groups hire grant writers to fund community and economic development projects. vhcb.org/redi.

Community Center Projects or Peer Learning

Vernon Recreation Department: vernonvt.org/recreation-department/

RecFit St. Johnsbury: Explore the structure and business model that has worked for St. Johnsbury Academy and RecFit and the Town of St. Johnsbury to offer unified recreation programming. stjacademy.org/recfit/.

Bennington Recreation Center: benningtonvt.org/services/parks__recreation/index.php.

Huntington Town Hall: townhall.huntingtonvt.org.

The Bristol Hub Teen Center and Skate Park: bristol skatepark.com.

Broad Brook Community Center at Guilford Grange: broadbrookcommunitycenter.org.

Brookfield Old Town Hall: facebook.com/brookfieldoldtownhall.

Cambridge Community Center: thecambridgecc.com/info/default.aspx.

Brattleboro HatchSpace (woodworking and makerspace): hatchspace.org/.

Burlington Generator Makerspace: generatorvt.com/.

Waterbury MakerSphere (shared creative and technical learning spaces): makerspherevt.com/.

Guilford Broad Brook Community Center (community programming): broadbrookcommunitycenter.org/.

Pittsford Village Farm (repurposed community space model): pittsfordvillagefarm.org/.

Co-Working Spaces

Do North Coworking, Lyndonville: Visit donorthcoworking.com.

Black River Innovation Campus (BRIC): bricvt.org/.

Hula: hulalakeside.com/.

Claremont Makerspace (Claremont, NH): claremontmakerspace.org/.

Improve Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility

Some communities are inspired to create sustainable transportation alternatives; others are seeking a tourism boost; and many want to improve recreation opportunities and livability for community members of all ages. Whatever the reason, Vermont communities are increasingly identifying bicycle and pedestrian safety as a top priority. Some of the action steps that have proven useful in Vermont communities are listed below. Which ones might be right for your community?

ACTION STEPS

1. Gather a team. Consider establishing a local walk/bike group.

Identify and recruit community members interested in bike and pedestrian safety and consider starting a local bike and walk group, or a Safe Routes to School Task Force (see Local Motion resources below for more information). Think broadly, including health and outdoor recreation enthusiasts, those interested in business and tourism, alternative energy supporters, families, youth, older Vermonters, schools, and others.

Review needs with local leadership (Select Board/City Council, planning commission, trails and recreation committee) as well as regional and statewide experts (see “Resources” below). Consult with existing non-profits and clubs that might share your interests.

Work with participants to agree on the group’s goals and purpose. Establish roles and responsibilities for the group. Start with small, accomplishable projects.

2. Research assets, needs, and opportunities.

Inventory and map existing bike and pedestrian resources including:

- Parks and recreational facilities
- Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure (bike paths, sidewalks, crosswalks, pedestrian bridges etc.)
- Existing municipal and public parking
- Bike parking
- Vacant properties that could be used to expand bike/pedestrian infrastructure
- Accessibility accommodations or lack of
- Common walking/biking routes to schools

Identify gaps in bike and pedestrian infrastructure. What is missing? What could be improved?

Conduct a community survey to gather information about current conditions, residents’ ideas about the town’s future streetscape and transportation connections, and/or elicit

feedback on a specific project. Design questions to gauge interest in biking and walking options. Are residents more interested in options for transit, recreation, or both?

Review your town plan. Does the transportation chapter already identify bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure as a priority? If so, does it offer any guidance about location, or resources to support improvements?

Conduct a walking tour to engage residents and explore what's working and not working. Consider conducting a walk audit (saferoutes.vermont.gov/sites/saferoutes/files/WalkAudit.pdf) with community members. Reach out to AARP-VT and Local Motion for support.

Contact the Vermont Agency of Transportation to identify any work they have done in your community and whether they could visit the community to help to identify current assets and needs.

Contact your area Regional Planning Commission (RPC) for assistance locating recent studies or plans that are relevant to your effort. The RPC could also:

- Help identify which new information would be most useful to develop a picture of the needs in the community and guide the design of a study.
- Help conduct necessary traffic, parking, scoping, or other studies for your town. Where are there safety and traffic concerns? Are there crosswalks needed? Where? You may need to recruit community volunteers to help carry out key studies.

3. Create a bicycle and pedestrian (or Active Transportation) plan.

Based on your research about your community's interests, assets and needs, build an action plan and timeline for your group's priorities. For process tools, see "Setting Priorities for Action."

If large-scale improvements are needed, and/or if your town does not have a plan to address bike/pedestrian safety, you could work with the Regional Planning Commission to develop a comprehensive master plan for bicycle and pedestrian safety and traffic calming, or a school travel plan to assist with Safe Routes to School programming.

Other efforts may be on a smaller scale, to address key problem areas or improvements. Strategies that have been explored and implemented in communities across VT include:

- "Pop-up" demonstrations to test and model ideas for improvements to streetscape, traffic calming, crosswalks, parking, pedestrian paths, and more.
- Crosswalk development or improvement.
- Safe Routes to School Programming and Education
- Traffic calming through installing solar radar feedback signs at the entrance to a downtown area, and through the use of speed bumps and rumble-strips.
- Development of a municipal plan for snow removal for pedestrian/bikeways. This could include sidewalk plowing, or an ordinance requiring property owners to maintain their own frontage.

- Installation or replacement of old street lighting with modern, downward-directed lighting. This can increase pedestrian visibility while reducing light pollution.
- Improvements to streetscape to allow for increased accessibility such as age-friendly infrastructure like benches and railings, and smooth, wheel-friendly surfaces with low or graded curbs.
- Constructing covered bike parking structures and downtown bike racks—great ways to encourage bicycle commuting.
- Launching a town-wide bike rental program, and/or a centrally located bike help center.
- Installing pet waste stations along paths and sidewalks, which helps ensure they stay clean and enjoyable for users.
- Improving signage. Partner with the municipality, highway department, and local artists to develop an integrated signage plan to improve visibility and direction. Signs could highlight features such as recreational infrastructure, bikeways, walking paths and rights-of-way, historic areas, downtown, and local businesses and attractions.
- Parking improvements such as properly designed parallel parking along downtown streets. These can be a good barrier between pedestrians and traffic and can increase downtown parking capacity without having to create additional lots.
- Aesthetic improvements. Partner with municipal officials and local volunteers to organize a tree trimming/planting campaign along downtown streets.
- A campaign to bury power lines. In addition to eliminating poles, this can clear up skylines and also reduce the number of power outages during storms.
- Installing “No Engine Brake” signs on steep hills in town, and signs diverting large trucks to downtown bypasses.
- Gathering creative ideas from community including artists, youth, older residents, and others, using a variety of tools, such as online platforms, planning charrettes, tabling at community events.

4. Share and celebrate with the community.

Some ideas include:

- Host a public event to share a new active transportation master plan and/or the successful completion of a bike/ped project with the community.
- Develop and distribute maps of local trails, bike paths, and other recreational facilities to local hotels, restaurants, and other community gathering places. Post the same content to the municipal website.
- Create a “Rules of the Road” pamphlet highlighting bike and pedestrian safety.
- Organize a “bike to work” day, or other awareness-raising campaign for active transportation options.
- Partner with local businesses to add incentives for commuters who walk or bike, like Bicycle Benefits: bicyclebenefits.org/#/home.

- Organize and conduct a walking or biking school bus with your local elementary school.
- Create an email list of residents interested in advocacy alerts or keep the community up to date with posts on Front Porch Forum.
- Consider applying to become a Bicycle Friendly Community (bikeleague.org/bfa/community/) and identifying Bicycle Friendly Businesses (bikeleague.org/bfa/business).

For additional outreach ideas, see “Communicating with the Community.”

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) are key partners in developing and implementing plans to improve bicycle and pedestrian safety and streetscape improvements. Find your RPC here: vapda.org/.

For planning assistance, contact the VT Agency of Transportation Planning Coordinator. vtrans.vermont.gov/planning.

Local Motion could provide technical assistance around bike lanes, safety and trail development. localmotion.org.

AARP has done great work supporting walkable communities and developing toolkits (see below) to point communities in the right direction to get started. aarp.org/vermont.

The VT Agency of Transportation has a bicycle and pedestrian program to help provide safe and convenient facilities for Vermonters who desire alternative transportation opportunities.

If a local effort is focused around the development of a biking or walking trail or path, the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) could be a potential partner to support development. vycc.org.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

The VT Agency of Transportation (VTrans) offers grant programs to support this work. Search vtrans.vermont.gov for these programs:

- Transportation Alternative Program.
- Bicycle and Pedestrian Program.

- The Better Connections Grant program provides funding to help communities develop plans that align land use, transportation, and community revitalization with transportation investments.

Towns can apply for Municipal Planning Grants from the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) to support planning projects. Visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives to find more information including about the Downtown Transportation Fund, a financing tool which assists municipalities in paying for transportation-related capital improvements within or serving a Designated Downtown.

USDA Rural Development offers many grants for infrastructure, community facilities, and economic and community development. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) offers grants to support marketing, economic development, workforce development, infrastructure, etc. nbrc.gov.

Vermont Housing Conservation Board (VHCB) has funding to help local groups hire grant writers to fund community and economic development projects. vhcb.org/redi.

Guides and Other Resources

Local Motion offers a wealth of resources, guides, and webinars to advance walking, biking, and rolling. localmotion.org/resources.

One resource to guide this work is “Quick Builds for Better Streets: A New Project Delivery Model for U.S Cities” created by People for Bikes: peopleforbikes.org.

Search the AARP website at aarp.org/livable-communities for a pop up demonstration toolkit.

Better Block supports communities in placemaking solutions for neighborhoods. betterblock.org.

America Walks has technical resources around pedestrian safety and crosswalks, etc. americawalks.org/resources.

Examples of Successful Community Projects

Local Motion technical assistance projects. localmotion.org/ta_reports.

Better Connections example projects. Search for the Better Connections Storymap on the Vtrans website at vtrans.vermont.gov/planning.

Increase Lake & River Stewardship and Access

Vermont's lakes, ponds, rivers, and other bodies of water are among our most celebrated natural assets. They are places of ecological richness, recreational joy, and deep community identity. For many towns, these waters are central to local culture and economy, yet they also require active stewardship to remain healthy, accessible, and resilient. As climate pressures increase, infrastructure ages, and recreational demand grows, communities across the state are stepping forward to protect and enhance their waters for residents and visitors alike.

ACTION STEPS

1. Build a team and gather information

Gather a diverse group of people who care about the health, access, and long-term vitality of your local lakes, ponds, and rivers. Include residents who live near the water, anglers and paddlers, outdoor recreation enthusiasts, local business owners, farmers, municipal officials, youth, retirees, and others who have a stake in the community's relationship with its waterways. (See "Inviting the Public"). Together, begin by taking a broad look at how your community currently interacts with its water resources.

Identify and connect with existing groups or committees already working on related issues — such as conservation commissions, recreation committees, lake associations, planning commissions, or trail groups. Reach out to these partners to understand their priorities, ongoing projects, and capacity. Consult with regional and statewide experts who can help you understand the ecological, recreational, and regulatory context of your waterway.

Work with participants to agree on the group's goals and purpose. Establish roles and responsibilities and determine how the group will make decisions and communicate with the broader community. Consider starting with small, achievable projects that build momentum and demonstrate early progress. These early wins can help build trust, attract volunteers, and signal that the group is committed to action.

As the team forms, take time to understand the history of your waterway. How has it been used in the past? What changes have shaped its current condition? What stories, traditions, or community memories are tied to it? This shared understanding will help ground the group's work in local identity and values.

2. Research Current Conditions, Needs, and Opportunities

Before developing a plan, take stock of what exists today. Conduct an inventory and create a map of your community's water-related assets, including:

- Public access points (formal and informal)
- Boat launches, fishing areas, and swimming spots
- Trails, parks, and recreational facilities near the water

- Shoreline conditions, erosion areas, and stormwater infrastructure
- Water-quality data and monitoring sites
- Existing signage, kiosks, or educational materials
- Parking areas and transportation connections
- Areas with limited or no public access
- Natural features, wildlife habitat, and sensitive ecological zones

Use your inventory to pinpoint where access, information, or infrastructure is lacking. Note what's missing, what could be improved and where opportunities exist to enhance recreation, education, or ecological health.

Conduct a community survey to learn how residents use the waterway today, what concerns they have, and what they hope to see in the future. Ask questions that help you understand whether people are most interested in recreation, conservation, education, economic development, or a combination of these. Consider distributing the survey online, by mail, or at community events to reach a broad audience.

Review your town plan to see whether water quality, recreation, or natural resource protection are already identified as priorities. Note any guidance about locations, partnerships, or strategies that could support your work.

Organize a shoreline or river walk to engage residents and explore what's working and what's not. Invite local experts to help identify erosion issues, invasive species, stormwater concerns, or opportunities for habitat restoration. Consider conducting a "waterway audit" with community members to document conditions and spark conversation.

Reach out to your Regional Planning Commission for assistance locating recent studies or plans related to water quality, recreation, or land use. RPCs can also help identify what additional information would be useful, and may be able to support traffic, parking, scoping, or environmental studies. You may need to recruit volunteers to help collect data or conduct observations.

This research phase will help your community develop a clear picture of current conditions and identify the most promising opportunities for improvement.

3. Develop a Lake & River Stewardship and Access Plan

Based on your research, begin developing a plan that outlines your community's priorities for improving water quality, expanding access, and strengthening stewardship. For process tools, see "Setting Priorities for Action."

If large-scale improvements are needed such as new access points, shoreline restoration, or major infrastructure upgrades, consider working with your Regional Planning Commission or a consultant to develop a comprehensive stewardship and access plan. This plan can help integrate your goals into the broader municipal plan and ensure alignment with state and regional priorities.

Outline conceptual improvements to the shoreline or river corridor, including:

- Water-quality protection strategies
- Access improvements such as trails, launches, or fishing platforms

- Safety and accessibility upgrades
- Educational or interpretive signage
- Habitat restoration or erosion control
- Stormwater or wastewater improvements
- Opportunities for recreation, tourism, or community events

It may be helpful to categorize projects into short-term and long-term priorities. Short-term projects such as installing signage, hosting clean-up days, or improving communication can build momentum and demonstrate progress. Long-term projects, such as access improvements, restoration work, or infrastructure upgrades, may require additional planning, permitting, and funding.

Consider engaging a community development professional, watershed coordinator, or recreation planner to help draft the plan and support implementation. They can assist with budgeting, project management, and connecting with funders.

As you develop the plan, gather creative ideas from community members, including artists, youth, older residents, and others. Use a variety of tools such as online platforms, planning charrettes, or tabling at community events to ensure broad participation. These ideas can help shape a plan that reflects the community's values and aspirations.

4. Celebrate, Communicate, and Involve the Community

Lake and river stewardship is long-term work. Improvements to water quality, access, and ecological health often unfold over many years, and the process can be difficult for the public to track. It is essential to communicate regularly about progress, celebrate incremental successes, and actively maintain community interest and involvement throughout the project.

Post regular updates on water-quality trends, access improvements, and project milestones through municipal communication channels, social media platforms, and local newspapers or radio. Share both scientific information and human stories: highlight volunteers, local champions, and the history of your waterway. (For tips, see "Communicating with the Community").

Invite community members to contribute letters of support or personal reflections about the lake or river, and share these on community listservs, local forums, or in the Town Report. These stories help build a shared sense of ownership and pride.

While technical work may be completed by engineers, contractors, or state partners, there will be many opportunities for hands-on community participation. Use your communications plan to put out calls for volunteers for shoreline clean-ups, stream walks, monitoring days, or access-site work parties. Organizing tasks for both skilled and unskilled volunteers can build enthusiasm and reduce labor costs.

Partner with local food vendors, musicians, or recreation groups to make stewardship days lively community events. Gather participant contact information to build a growing list of volunteers and supporters who can be mobilized for future efforts.

Collaborate with schools, libraries, recreation departments, and civic organizations to brainstorm educational programs, interpretive signage, or youth-led projects. Engage local artists, historians, and cultural leaders to explore opportunities for public installations, story-maps, or place-based programming that highlight the ecological and cultural significance of your waterway.

Ensure that lake- or river-related events are included in your community events calendar. Promote seasonal activities such as paddling days, river festivals, winter walks, or citizen-science workshops to keep the waterway visible year-round.

Once a major milestone is reached, such as the completion of an access improvement or the launch of a new stewardship initiative, host a kickoff or celebration event to thank everyone involved. Invite the community, neighboring towns, and the media. This is an excellent opportunity to highlight upcoming programs, share next steps, and reinforce the community's long-term commitment to its lake or river.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

State & Regional Partners

Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) provides water-quality data, Tactical Basin Plans, regulatory guidance, and technical assistance for lake and river projects. dec.vermont.gov/.

Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (AAFM) supports agricultural best practices, nutrient-management strategies, and partnerships with farmers and landowners. agriculture.vermont.gov/.

Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) offer mapping, facilitation, project scoping, and help identifying funding opportunities. vapda.org/.

County Conservation Districts provide technical assistance for erosion control, stormwater practices, and landowner outreach. vacd.org/conservation-districts/.

Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation (FPR) supports recreation planning, trail development, and access improvements. fpr.vermont.gov/.

Conservation & Watershed Organizations

Vermont River Conservancy provides expertise in river access, conservation easements, and community river projects. vermontriverconservancy.org/.

Vermont Land Trust (VLT) supports shoreline conservation and long-term land stewardship. vlt.org/.

The Nature Conservancy: Vermont Chapter provides ecological expertise and conservation planning support. nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/vermont/.

Lake Champlain Basin Program (LCBP) offers grants, technical assistance, and watershed-planning tools. lcbp.org/.

Local Lake & Watershed Associations bring local knowledge, volunteer networks, and community engagement capacity. Some groups can be found here: watershedsunitedvt.org/watershed-groups/watershed-groups.

The Federation of Vermont Lakes and Ponds (FOVLAP) promotes water quality practices in Vermont's lakes and ponds. vermontlakes.org/.

Education & Community Partners

UVM Extension & Master Gardeners can advise on shoreline plantings, erosion control, and ecological landscaping. uvm.edu/extension/water-quality-resources.

Local Schools & Youth Programs can be potential partners for curriculum development, monitoring projects, and stewardship events.

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail can provide resources for paddling-based recreation and information on a paddling trail. northernforestcanoetrail.org/.

Connecticut River Paddlers' Trail hosts campsites, paddling information and recreational information along the Connecticut River. connecticutriverpaddlerstrail.org/

Vermont Adaptive Ski & Sports are a resource for accessible recreation and adaptive paddling programs. vermontadaptive.org/.

Local Historical & Cultural Organizations can support interpretation, storytelling, and place-based education. Vermont Historical Society maintains a list of local Historic Societies and organizations. vermonthistory.org/.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Other Guides, Tools, and Resources

The Vermont Dept. of Environmental Conservation has many tools that can be accessed on their website at dec.vermont.gov including:

- DEC Clean Water Portal and Dashboard provides information on proposed and completed water-quality projects statewide.
- Tactical Basin Planning offers watershed-specific priorities, strategies, and data to guide local action.
- ANR Healthy Homes Initiative provides resources and links for improving water and wastewater systems.
- Clean Water Service Provider (CWSP) Model supports project identification and implementation in partnership with RPCs and AAFM.
- Watershed Action Plan Models examples from other Vermont towns can help guide local planning and public involvement

LCBP Education & Outreach Grants support community engagement, communications, and stewardship programming. lcbp.org/.

Funding

VT Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) offers grants for water-quality projects, watershed planning, and community engagement. dec.vermont.gov.

Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation (FPR) Recreation Trails Program and Land & Water Conservation Fund grants can support access improvements. fpr.vermont.gov.

Vermont Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD) Municipal Planning Grants and Community Development Program grants may support planning and infrastructure. accd.vermont.gov/housing.

Vermont Department of Buildings & General Services (BGS) Recreation Facilities and Regional Economic Development grants can support capital improvements. bgs.vermont.gov.

USDA Rural Development Community Facilities grants can support water, wastewater, and recreation infrastructure. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) Catalyst Program supports water systems, outdoor recreation infrastructure, and community development. nbrc.gov.

National Park Service – Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program provides technical assistance for river access and trail projects. nps.gov/orgs/rtca.

Watershed & Conservation Funding

Lake Champlain Basin Program (LCBP) offers grants for education, outreach, water-quality projects, and habitat restoration.

Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB) Conservation funding and the REDI program, which pays for grant-writing support.

Local Conservation Districts & Watershed Groups may offer small grants or cost-share programs for landowners.

Philanthropic & Local Funding

Vermont Community Foundation. Capacity-building, regional impact, and community-development grants may support planning or pilot projects.

Local Businesses & Employers can offer volunteer programs or sponsorships for stewardship events.

Town Appropriations or Bonds. Municipal funding can support planning, staffing, or capital improvements when paired with strong public engagement.

Lake & River Stewardship and Access Projects or Peer Learning

The Town of Franklin worked with the State and local groups on Lake Carmi water quality efforts: franklinwatershed.org and dec.vermont.gov/watershed/restoring/carmi.

The Barre Rivers Collective: <https://winooskiriver.org/barre-rivers-collective>.

Manchester Riverwalk: <https://manchesterriverwalk.org/>.

Economic and Community Vitality



Revitalize Your Downtown or Village Center

Many of Vermont's downtowns and village centers were built in an age and economy that's very different from the one we live in today. While our downtowns may boast a variety of impressive buildings and other infrastructure, some could use a revitalization of energy, creativity, and an economic boost—and Vermonters are making it happen.

ACTION STEPS

1. Gather a team to explore your opportunities.

Gather a diverse group of people who are interested in downtown/village revitalization. Include local businesspeople and town or village officials, and don't forget others who have a stake in a vibrant town center such as young people, retirees, artists, and others. (See "Inviting the Public"). Together, take a comprehensive look at what the area looks like today using some of the following steps:

- Conduct an inventory and make a map of existing downtown/village resources including businesses, restaurants, bike, pedestrian, and recreational infrastructure, parking, apartment blocks, cultural amenities, historic features, local geographic or geologic features.
- Research patterns of change that have contributed to the current state of your downtown. If downtown used to be a busier place, what made it that way? Were there certain business departures that left gaps? Have traffic patterns changed ways that make downtown less accessible to foot traffic? How might what you've learned inform your revitalization efforts?
- Consult your town plan to see whether it offers any guidance regarding the downtown area.
- Determine whether your town has a Designated Downtown or a Designated Village Center. If so, be sure to contact your local downtown organization (if you have a Designated Downtown) or any group in town focused on your village center. It will be critical to partner on these efforts. If your community does not have a designation, pursuing a designation could help you connect to key resources and support. (See Resources below.)

2. Solicit community ideas and create a vision.

Local people may have radically different visions for the use of space and the types of visitors they hope to attract. Since downtown revitalization can be lengthy and logistically challenging, it is imperative to begin with a shared vision. This may mean making compromises, but in the long run, it is worth it to have as many allies in the project as possible.

- Consider hosting a public event, such as a potluck or block party, and inviting the whole community to come share their ideas for the future of downtown.
- Be creative: You could have a table where kids draw or describe their vision; or poster boards where residents jot down the elements they'd most like to see in a revitalized downtown. You could connect with a local artist to do live sketches of ideas generated, which could be used to determine tasks and strategies that would need to occur to reach those visions.
- This event could be paired with a community survey distributed online and by mail asking for similar input on the future of downtown.
- See "Developing A Community Vision" for more ideas.

3. Develop a downtown or village master plan.

What needs to change? Laying out a thorough and comprehensive master plan is no small task, but having a robust document to guide the revitalization process is a must.

- Engage actively with your local planning commission or planning department. They can help ensure that the plan you develop is integrated into the larger municipal plan and can be a resource in accessing specific mapping/layout tools.
- Outline the conceptual alterations to the streetscape, including safety and accessibility upgrades, new infrastructure, parking, building renovations, parks and green spaces, access to local waterways, and so on. (For more ideas, see "Improve Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility" and "Build a Community Park or Green Space").
- It can be helpful to delineate projects into two categories: Those that can be accomplished in the short term, and those which necessitate a longer-term commitment. Focusing initially on the short-term projects can help maintain community enthusiasm for the project, and clearly signal that progress is being made.
- Consider engaging a community development professional to help draft the Master Plan and see the project through to implementation. They could help you with establishing a board structure, budgeting, and connecting with funders.

4. Maintain community engagement and energy.

You've engaged the community in creating a vision and action steps. Now they'll be interested in helping make the vision a reality.

- Certain pieces of the revitalization master plan will lend themselves easily to community participation. Tree-planting campaigns, park clean-up days, and volunteer mural paintings are all great examples of ways to involve the community and build enthusiasm for the project.
- You could engage local schools about the possibility of integrating the theme of revitalization into their curriculum. Students could be asked to help design different aspects of the local streetscape or submit essays describing the future downtown.
- Develop an overall marketing plan for the project that capitalizes on local assets. Some towns have found it useful to choose a particular image (a mountain, tree,

river, moose) and create a “brand” for the redevelopment. Stickers, tote-bags, and other free merchandise can help raise awareness.

Keep the community engaged in the process and aware of your progress through social media. You might create a website or social media presence for your revitalization effort, and post regular updates on the municipal website and community listservs. (See “Communicating with the Community” for more ideas.)

Downtown revitalization is likely to be a long process. Consider hosting ongoing mini-events to celebrate milestones and community achievements. For more on ideas see “Develop Events that Strengthen Community.”

Some Ideas for Downtown/Village Revitalization:

Approach local business owners about the possibility of extending business hours on a specific night or establishing a promotional weekend where shoppers get a discount for shopping downtown.

Consider gateways, artistic signage, and other streetscape enhancements to draw attention to local assets and strengthen a sense of place. These elements can also increase the navigability of your downtown for visitors and help strengthen the feeling of “having arrived somewhere.”

Explore ideas with local artists for creating public installations and developing an arts space downtown. Banners, creative lighting, public sculpture, and murals are all opportunities to highlight local assets and enrich the pedestrian experience.

Consider accessibility concerns. Do all curbs have graduated access? Are intersections safe to people who are visually impaired? Are there enough benches, support railings and public resting areas along pedestrian thoroughfares to cater to an older population?

Take downtown vegetation to the next level. Consider additional tree and shrub plantings and sidewalk potted plants. Talk to local businesses about installing hanging flowerpots along their frontage.

Create a central, age-friendly recreational hub by installing outdoor chess or ping pong tables.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

The Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD)’s State Designation Programs would be a great place to start to discuss ways to move forward with your efforts. accd.vermont.gov/community-development.

Preservation Trust of Vermont can offer support for historic buildings and historic preservation efforts. ptvermont.org.

Your local Regional Planning Commission (RPC) can be a key partner in helping to develop a plan and map out the future of the downtown/village center. Find the RPC for your area here: vapda.org/.

The Urban Community Forestry Program could help to gain access to technical assistance for street trees and town/village greens. vtcommunityforestry.org.

Local Motion is a statewide organization with an interest in making village centers more bike and pedestrian friendly, and by extension promoting stronger downtown cores. localmotion.org.

AARP has a “complete streets” program and guide that helps communities make neighborhoods and village centers more accessible and pedestrian friendly. aarp.org/livable-communities/

State of Vermont Tourism and Marketing could be a partner in discussing ways to market your town as a destination. accd.vermont.gov/tourism.

The Citizens’ Institute for Rural Design offers annual technical assistance grants for a three-day design workshop meant to involve/engage the whole community: rural-design.org.

The National Complete Streets Coalition could be a good resource for materials and support. Learn more at smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets. There is also a Complete Streets Guide for Vermont that can be accessed through vtrans.vermont.gov.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

The Better Connections grant program is a partnership between the Vermont Agencies of Transportation and Commerce and Community Development. This is a program designed to help communities develop a plan for the future of their downtown and village centers. vtrans.vermont.gov/planning/projects-programs/better-connections.

Other VTrans Funding Sources which can be found at vtrans.vermont.gov:

- Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) provides funding for projects defined as transportation alternatives, including on- and off-road pedestrian and bicycle facilities, infrastructure projects for improving non-driver access to public transportation and enhancing mobility, community improvement activities, and environmental mitigation, trails that serve a transportation purpose, and safe routes to school projects.
- Bicycle and Pedestrian Program provides funding and guidance for alternative transportation facilities such as bike paths and sidewalks.

The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has several grant or tax credit programs that can support this work. accd.vermont.gov/community-development.

The Vermont Community Development Program offers grants to support planning, infrastructure, housing and economic development. Community Development Block Grants are federal Planning Grants available through the VCDP. accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp.

The Northern Border Regional Commission offers grants to support marketing, economic development, workforce development, infrastructure, etc. nbrc.gov/content/vermont.

USDA Rural Development offers federal support for towns and villages through a variety of loan and grant programs aimed at enhancing rural quality of life through investing in housing, essential community facilities, municipal infrastructure, and economic development. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

The Vermont Arts Council offers grant programs that support work at the intersection of art and community revitalization. vermontartscouncil.org.

Vermont Housing Conservation Board has funding to help local groups hire grant writers to fund community and economic development projects. vhcb.org/redi.

Guides and Other Resources

The Bethel Better Block Project is a good example of Village revitalization. bethelrevitalizationinitiative.org/better-block.

Community Workshop LLC and AARP teamed up to create a DIY Community Cookbook – a free, hands-on guide to do-it-yourself projects that can lead to big improvements for towns and neighborhoods. communityworkshopllc.com/diy-community-cookbook.



Support Your Local Economy and Businesses

For many Vermont communities, strengthening the local economy is a top priority. What economic development looks like varies from town to town, so there's no single recipe for success. What follows is a collection of actions that have been effective in Vermont communities—you can choose the initiatives that are most relevant to your community.

ACTION STEPS

1. Organize an initial action team.

To recruit members for an action team, start by identifying and inviting local businesspeople and interested community members. Keep in mind the variety of businesses in your community—large and small, storefront and online, home businesses and cottage industries.

Meet with existing business and economic groups in your region that might be interested in your work (regional Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, and others). Ask how your efforts can most effectively support each other.

Gather this group to agree on goals and initial priorities. (See “Setting Priorities for Action”). Even if the committee was specifically formed around a pre-identified project (like downtown revitalization), it's important to begin by making sure everyone agrees on the committee's purpose and priorities.

2. Gather data on interests, assets, and needs.

Learn more about how your economic development committee can be most useful to your community. Research and analysis tools that have helped many Vermont communities include:

- **Surveys:** Survey existing businesses about their needs, wants, and ideas. Survey residents about desired retailers, manufacturers, workspaces or maker-spaces, and other ideas.
- **S.W.O.T Analysis:** Your work may be informed by conducting a strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (SWOT) analysis. Many models for this tool exist online. Remember that economic strengths are not limited to existing businesses. Strengths may include natural and historic resources, tourism potential, downtown or other physical infrastructure, human capital (skilled workers, youth, investors), strong sense of community, arts and traditions.
- **Creating indicators of success.** How will you know when you've begun to achieve your goals? Establish baseline economic indicators in a dashboard to measure progress.

- Creating a comprehensive business listing. Include large, visible businesses, as well as home businesses, consultants, and so on. This listing will not only help your team organize its initial efforts. It could also be useful to help businesses network, support each other, and share resources, and could eventually develop into a buy local or external marketing tool for your community.

3. Convene people who are interested in the local economy.

This doesn't only mean businesses. People have a variety of reasons to be interested in a healthy economy and strong tax base.

- Build out the committee to expand engagement and buy-in. Think beyond local business people to include town government, artists and craftspeople, local youth, retirees, entrepreneurs of all kinds, and other community members.
- Educate and engage local officials such as the Select Board and planning commission. Get on their agenda at regular meetings.
- Even if some potential collaborators don't choose to be a formal part of the committee, they can brief the committee on their economic activities and help you identify ways to build partnerships and support.
- For additional ideas on outreach, see "Inviting the Public."

4. Formulate and implement your action plan.

Based on the information you've gathered from existing businesses and residents, build an action plan and timeline for your group's priorities. Questions to consider while creating the plan include:

- What type of development makes sense in your community? Do you want to foster new business initiatives? Expand existing development? Link with successful efforts already happening in your region?
- Who should be involved? Identify tasks for volunteers, and topics on which you may wish to engage technical experts.
- How might you create and market a list of the competitive advantages of doing business in your town?
- How will you handle outreach and public engagement?

Communities choose many different pathways depending on their priorities. Here are just some of the initiatives taken on by economic development committees across Vermont. Which seems right for your town?

- Seek changes to town plan language and zoning that encourages economic development. Create ordinances and incentives to encourage and/or require owners to create business opportunities.
- Invite state agencies that administer State permitting to come talk about permitting processes and how to make improvements locally.
- Inventory under-utilized properties and identify possible uses (including buildings and land).

- Conduct a feasibility study to identify possible uses/re-uses of properties; prioritize them based on the committee's identified goals.
- Work with the Regional Economic Development Corporation (REDC) to match zoned industrial and commercial areas with potential businesses. Ensure that vacant properties are listed on DED's Site Locator (<http://accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/properties>).
- Hire a consultant, possibly as an interim economic development coordinator. This person could:
 - Help obtain nonprofit 501(c)(3) status. This status improves ability to receive donations and funding, build membership, write town grants, and gain support and investment from local banks.
 - Help establish an economic development board and structure, identify funding sources for maintaining the organization, organize economic development campaigns and promotional events, and recruit volunteers to serve on the working committee.
 - Once 501(c)(3) status is established, hire a part- or full-time public administrator to undertake both economic and community development activities.
- Develop a town revolving loan fund to support local business.
- Create or enhance a town website to promote local business
- Establish a marketing plan for the community.
- Create a pitch to attract businesses and develop a marketing and communications plan and pitch packet to engage new businesses. Establish a "Bragging Plan" to tell great stories about your community's assets, activities and good news.
- Explore opportunities to expand lodging options. Look into collective advertising and identify who has spaces available for lodging.
- Create a Small Business Network to enable networking for entrepreneurs.
- Pursue Industrial Park development. Identify opportunities to expand available land for development and work with the town to expand town-owned land or facilities.
- Create a Complete Streets policy and then follow up with a Complete Streets implementation plan. The plan could include sidewalk maintenance and new construction in town, convenient bike parking at key locations in town, signage in town for pedestrians, and mapping (See "Improve Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility").
- Implement a one percent sales and consumption tax to fund community and economic development projects (Note: This requires a city/town charter amendment and Legislative approval). Vermont examples include Burlington, South Burlington, Winooski, Killington, Middlebury and St. Albans Town.

5. Share your stories and celebrate your efforts.

Every small success your committee has is an opportunity to build on your momentum and increase community interest. Communicate about your work through local media, social media, and other tools. (See "Communicating with the Community").

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Your local Regional Development Corporation (RDC) and/or Regional Planning Commission (RPC) can offer technical support and help connect you with regional economic development professionals and initiatives in your area:

- Regional Development Corporations (RDCs): rdcssofvermont.org.
- Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs): vapda.org/.

The US Small Business Administration (SBA) can help with guidance and support for businesses in the region. sba.gov/district/vermont.

White and Burke Associates has helped towns re-envision economic development initiatives. whiteandburke.com/.

The Vermont Department of Economic Development is a great resource to consult with on economic development planning and strategies. accd.vermont.gov/economic-development.

The Town of St. Johnsbury has made significant progress revitalizing its downtown and strengthening local economic activity. For guidance on effective strategies and best practices, contact the Town Manager's office at 802-748-3926 to learn more about the approaches they have taken and the next steps they recommend.

The University of Vermont Extension has many resources for Community Development. uvm.edu/extension/community-development.

Vermont Small Business Development Center advises and serves as a resource for small businesses. vtsbdc.org/.

Connect with the Bethel Revitalization Initiative to learn about grassroots revitalization and supporting entrepreneurs. bethelrevitalizationinitiative.org.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

USDA Rural Development offers various grant programs including the Community Facilities Technical Assistance and Training (TAT) Grant Program and the Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG). Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) can help with general technical assistance, municipal planning grants, RBDGs, and tax credits. accd.vermont.gov.

Vermont Community Foundation could be a funding source for economic and community development projects. vermontcf.org.

The Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC): nbrc.gov.

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB)'s Rural Economic Development Initiative is available to help small communities apply for grants. vhcb.org/redi.

Preservation Trust of Vermont can be a resource for preservation projects and other community initiatives and has some funding to help with planning and assessments. ptvermont.org/.

The Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC) provides small grants for Smart Growth. vnrc.org/small-grants-for-smart-growth/.

There are different revolving loan fund opportunities available through:

- Northeastern Vermont Development Association, nvda.net/.
- Community Capital of Vermont: communitycapitalvt.org.
- New Hampshire Community Loan Fund: communityloanfund.org.
- The Vermont Community Loan Fund: investinvermont.org.

The Vermont Arts Council's Project Grants can be used to support community projects that bring the arts to the center of the community. vermontartscouncil.org.



Develop A Community Trust

A Community Trust is a non-profit organization with a locally based, community-first mission. These organizations are nimble entities that are formed to support vibrant and resilient communities, downtowns and villages. Community Trust Organizations coordinate with community members and partners to understand and support pressing community needs.

A Community Trust is a flexible tool for taking on community revitalization projects. Often, Community Trusts choose to become a federally recognized 501(c)(3) to allow them the maximum financial benefits and the financial flexibility to meet their goals.

The formation of a Community Trust provides a collaborative, sustainable, and locally driven approach to small-scale revitalization, giving residents the opportunity to shape their own future. Some benefits of this model include:

Local leadership and capacity building: By involving local leaders in the formation and operation of the trust, this model helps to build the capacity outside of the municipality, to take on revitalization projects. This can help to build local skills and social capital and builds local pride and ownership in projects that the trust takes on.

Flexibility and adaptability: Trusts are adaptable to changing circumstances and can evolve over time to meet shifting community needs. This ensures longevity but allows the group to respond to shifting economic conditions, business closures, or other unexpected changes.

Partnership building: Community trusts often bring together local residents with businesses, non-profits, funders, or other partners to accomplish projects. These collaborations can leverage additional resources, expertise, and support to maximize the impact of revitalization initiatives.

ACTION STEPS

1. Assess Existing Organizations and Determine the Best Path Forward

Begin by reviewing the community-focused organizations already active in your town. Consider whether any of these groups could expand their mission to encompass the work of a Community Trust. Some organizations may already have overlapping goals or the administrative capacity to take on this role.

If an existing nonprofit has a compatible mission, explore whether it could formally broaden its scope or collaborate on the shared goals identified by your group. Even if an organization is not interested in shifting its work, it may be willing to serve as a fiscal sponsor while your new Trust gets established.

If no existing organization aligns with your goals, move forward with forming a new entity. This process begins with gathering a small group of dedicated community members to outline a shared vision and discuss the long-term aspirations of the Trust. Work together to craft a mission that is broad enough to remain relevant over time while still grounded in the needs of the community. For example, a mission focused on

improving the built environment and supporting social and economic resilience is more durable than one tied to a single project.

Once you have a shared purpose, select a name for your organization and establish a dedicated email address for official communication.

2. Build a Strong and Representative Board

Identify at least three individuals who can serve as the initial Board Officers – typically a President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer. These roles carry administrative responsibilities in addition to the general duties of board service.

From there, expand your board to a group of seven to thirteen members. Aim for a diverse mix of people who bring different social networks, professional skills (such as legal, financial, or development expertise), and community perspectives. A broad and representative board helps ensure that the Trust's work reflects the full range of local needs and opportunities.

As you formalize your organization, incorporate as a Vermont nonprofit by filing Articles of Incorporation with the Secretary of State. This step establishes your legal structure and allows you to move forward with additional administrative requirements.

3. Engage the Community and Establish Organizational Foundations

Once incorporated, take time to understand the current needs of your community. While you may have a sense of local priorities, it is essential to gather input from a wide range of residents and stakeholders. Meet with local leaders, governing bodies, businesses, and social service organizations. Host community conversations or public forums to hear directly from residents, and distribute a public survey—both online and in print—to reach as many people as possible.

Use this input to guide the development of your Bylaws, which define how your organization will operate. Bylaws should outline governance structures, meeting procedures, board responsibilities, term limits, and a dissolution clause. Many existing Community Trusts are willing to share sample Bylaws, and legal support can be helpful during this process.

Next, obtain an Employer Identification Number (EIN) through the IRS and open a bank account in your organization's name. With these pieces in place, apply for federal 501(c)(3) status. This step can be complex, and consulting with an attorney is recommended.

4. Fundraise, Launch Early Projects, and Maintain Ongoing Community Connection

With your organizational structure in place, begin fundraising to support your work. It is helpful to have a specific project or cause when approaching potential donors. Board members should make contributions within their means to establish early momentum and demonstrate commitment.

Start by reaching out to individuals who have a strong personal connection to the community and the capacity to make significant contributions. After securing early

support, launch a broader public campaign to build community buy-in and encourage participation at all giving levels.

As funding becomes available, take on initial projects that respond directly to community needs. If your long-term goals involve large-scale work—such as renovating a building—share regular updates to maintain transparency and trust. At the same time, consider implementing smaller, quick-win projects that demonstrate responsiveness, such as hosting community potlucks, organizing a parade, or coordinating a holiday decorating contest.

Finally, return to the community at regular intervals to reassess needs and ensure your work remains aligned with local priorities. Ongoing engagement helps sustain trust, strengthen relationships, and guide the long-term direction of the Community Trust.

RESOURCES

If the project involves the renovation and preservation of an historic building, the Preservation Trust of Vermont could be a key partner for consultation, project development assistance, fiscal counseling and potential grant support if a building is over fifty years old. ptvermont.org.

Your local Regional Development Corporation (RDC) and/or Regional Planning Commission (RPC) can offer technical support and help connect you with regional economic development professionals and initiatives in your area:

- Regional Development Corporations (RDCs): rdcsofvermont.org.
- Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs): vapda.org/

Common Good Vermont supports all aspects of nonprofit creation, governance, and more. commongoodvt.org/.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Established Community Trusts

- Rupert Village Trust, Sheldon General Store & Community Center: rupertvillagetrust.org.
- Albany Community Trust: Albany General Store: albanycommunitytrust.org.
- Wolcott Community Trust: wolcottvt.org/committees/trust.
- Snowsville Community Trust: snowsvilletrust.org.
- Woodstock Community Trust: woodstockcommunitytrust.org.
- Reading Community Trust: readingcommunitytrust.org.

Funding

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB)'s Rural Economic Development Initiative is available to help small communities apply for grants. vhcb.org/redi.

Preservation Trust of Vermont can be a resource for preservation projects and other community initiatives and has some funding to help with planning and assessments. ptvermont.org.

The Vermont Community Foundation may have funding to support your project. vermontcf.org.

The Vermont Department of Buildings and General Services has a Building Communities grant program that can fund community facilities projects. bgs.vermont.gov/commissioner/building-communities-grants.

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development has several grant programs that could support both feasibility and planning efforts as well as building and implementation. accd.vermont.gov/community-development.

USDA Rural Development provides grants to support community facilities. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

Cause IQ maintains a directory of Vermont-based grantmaking foundations. causeiq.com/directory/foundations-list/vermont-state/.



JOHNSON: Food Access

Through a relationship-centered process, Johnson turned a community conversation into a resilient local food system. The 2024 Reimagine Johnson process that was launched in the wake of devastating floods surfaced local food access as a pressing need. Building on an existing strength, the town's beloved community oven, a group of people created Johnson Eats to support more sustained community food access. The group moved quickly wherever gaps appeared: supporting the reopening of the general store, stepping in when SNAP benefits were disrupted, and connecting neighbors to local farmers. To sustain momentum, the informal group became an official town committee, but kept its welcoming spirit by using co-chairs and flexible participation so anyone could contribute.



Lesson: Build from existing community assets, act visibly on gaps, and keep leadership structures flexible enough that connection drives the work.

Develop an Agricultural Network

Vermonters consistently list working farms as one of the top assets they appreciate about our state. One of the most effective ways communities have discovered to support farmers is to work with them to organize networks and share resources. Here are some of the steps Vermont communities have taken to create and support agricultural networks.

ACTION STEPS

1. Build a team and gather information.

Reach out to farmers and the community to convene an action committee. Recruit broadly, thinking not only of farmers and producers, but people who want to support agriculture in your community like families, gardeners, schools, colleges, food shelves, non-profit organizations supporting farmers, and farm-related businesses. (For tips on reaching out, see “Inviting the Public”). Together, your team can gather information to inform its networking efforts. Your research might include:

- Developing a comprehensive directory of farmers and producers in the area.
- Surveying farmers’ and producers’ needs and interest in coming together. Their networking interests may include regular gatherings, educational opportunities, tool and skill sharing, market development, branding and co-distributing, and more (see list below).
- Surveying the public to identify their interests in agriculture and how they could contribute and how the network might serve them. Consider polling residents about food needs and preferences at high-traffic locations.
- As part of your planning, consider surveying farms across the region to determine interest in a central food hub, and review feasibility study work already completed by regional partners.
- You may also want to host meetings with co-op staff or general store operators to learn about cooperative models and alternative ownership structures, as well as express your interest in supporting local producers.
- Conduct an asset mapping and gap analysis of local food access, infrastructure, and agricultural resources. This may include mapping farms, grocery stores, food shelves, community gardens, and distribution points, and identifying gaps or opportunities for collaboration. Publicize the assets so your community knows about them. Talk to the resource providers listed at the end of this chapter about how to address the gaps.
- Create a list of resources already available specific to your area for farmers and producers including business planning, mental health, food hubs, etc. Ensure that any resources or efforts you develop would be complementary (not duplicative).
- You may also want to convene small groups to explore topics such as alternative ownership models for grocery stores, food shelf access, or innovative climate resilience engineering for vulnerable agricultural or commercial sites. Tap into

existing networks - Farm to Plate, Vermont Food Security Network, Veg and Berry, Women's Agricultural Network, NOFA-VT etc.

2. Develop the network.

Based on producer and community feedback, determine your group's priorities and develop an organizing and communications plan for the network.

- Work with a team to agree on goals, priorities, and key projects. (See "Setting Priorities for Action").
- Determine a regular meeting schedule for the group.
- Determine your structure and leadership model.
- Create a way to regularly communicate with producers and/or the public. Consider options such as Facebook Group, list serve email, website, or newsletter.

3. Implement Your Priority Projects

Analyze responses from producer and community surveys, then engage with regional and statewide partners as your network team works to build an action plan.

Priorities for action will vary from place to place. A variety of steps that have proven valuable in Vermont communities is listed below. Which services and support might be most useful to the farmers and producers in your area? Research sources of funding that are available to support priority projects.

- Workshops for farmers from outside experts.
- Peer learning opportunities—farmers teaching farmers.
- Farmer/producer social gatherings.
- Cooperative equipment-sharing or purchasing.
- Coordinated trucks carrying product to larger markets (like Burlington, Montreal, Boston).
- Collective local or regional branding and marketing.
- Developing or coordinating slaughter/butcher facilities.
- On-farm energy efficiency and power generation.
- Bulk purchasing of fuel.
- Join or develop a regionally-shared "Food Hub" for storage and production.
- Land use arrangements that connect landowners with land stewards who share similar management values and goals.
- Support for legacy farmers to create their transition/succession plans.
- Inventory of land to assess the amount and location of underutilized farmland, and a system to connect new and young farmers to land.
- Launching of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), a Healthcare CSA/Farmacy: Food is Medicine program, and/ or Cooperative Farm Stand.
- Initiation of a local farmers market and/or food trucks.

- Advocating for increased procurement of local foods across food service providers in schools, colleges, prisons and other institutions.
- Community work days on farms.
- Organize gleaning work days in partnership with local gleaning organization.
- Social events and community dinners at farms.
- Weekly or monthly events, similar to Feast and Field or Summervale, with music, food and art.
- Developing compost facilities to support local agriculture.
- Strengthening farm-to-school programming.
- Explore purchasing food from local farms for food shelves.
- Coordinating food resources to improve walkability and access.
- If your community is exploring grocery access, consider convening meetings to investigate cooperative models, alternative ownership structures, or partnerships with replacement grocery stores.

Which services and support might be most useful to the farmers and producers in your area? Research sources of funding that are available to support priority projects. In addition, reflect and evaluate your work as you go: What worked well? What challenges did we encounter? What do we want to consider to keep momentum going?

4. Communicate, Share, and Celebrate

Agriculture is important to Vermonters, and your community will want to hear about your work. Spreading the word about your efforts will build enthusiasm and volunteer energy. Use a variety of tools including traditional outreach, celebratory events, and social media. (See “Communicating with the Community”).

Consider creating a “Food Access Fact Sheet” summarizing local resources, gaps, and opportunities.

Share regular updates from selectboard meetings or other local government bodies to keep the community informed about agricultural and food access initiatives.

Community meals—whether hosted at farms, community centers, or partner institutions—can help build momentum and strengthen relationships.

RESOURCES

Reach out to these organizations in the early stages while you’re recruiting members and doing initial research. Many of these organizations have chapters or connections to groups statewide, so ask them whether they have any efforts ongoing in your area that you can support or build on.

Who Can Help

The Vermont Food Hub Collaborative consists of six food hubs across the state who are committed to increasing sales and market opportunities for local producers and enhancing the viability of Vermont's agricultural sector. vtfarmtoplate.com/network/vermont-food-hub-collaborative.

The Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE), Vital Communities' Valley Food and Farm, and ACORN are models of how a Food Hub is deeply connected to the community and connects producers across the region. Any of them could share their experience connecting producers and the community. Learn more about CAE at hardwickagriculture.org, Valley Food and Farm initiatives at vitalcommunities.org, or ACORN at acornvt.org.

The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) or the above Food Hubs can offer peer learning, technical assistance, and connections to markets.

Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund hosts the Farm to Plate Network which is a statewide food and agricultural network. vtfarmtoplate.com/.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food & Markets could help with many aspects of an agricultural network and local market development. agriculture.vermont.gov.

The University of Vermont Extension could be a partner in helping to identify and implement agricultural support and community connection. Contact UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture: uvm.edu/extension/sustainableagriculture

Additional partners may include the Food Co-op Initiative (fci.coop/), the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (nfca.coop/), and regional co-op leaders who can share lessons learned from successful and unsuccessful cooperative development efforts (see below for peer connections).

Vermont Gleaning Collective tracks and coordinates gleaning efforts across the state, visit vermontgleaningcollective.org/ to find a gleaning program in your area or start one.

Farm and Land Access Resources

The Land Access and Opportunity Board provides support for land access for Vermonters from historically marginalized or disadvantaged communities who continue to face barriers to land and home ownership. More info at landaccessvt.org/

Other Farm and Land Access Resources include Land For Good: landforgood.org/, Vermont Land Link: vermontlandlink.org/, New England Farmland Finder: newenglandfarmlandfinder.org/, and

Vermont Land Trust: vlt.org/how-we-help/farmers-farmland/. These may be able to help your community or farmers in your area access land suitable for growing food, and may be useful resources for new and established farmers in your network.

Funding

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) offers business advising and funding support to farm and forestry businesses. vhcb.org/farm-forest-viability/business-advising/.

VT Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets: agriculture.vermont.gov/grants and grants through the Working Lands Enterprise Fund: workinglands.vermont.gov

The New England Grassroots Environmental Fund could provide small seed grants to help the group get started: grassrootsfund.org/dollars.

City Market's Seedling Grants fund projects that strengthen the local food system. citymarket.coop/co-op-seedling-grant

USDA Rural Development (USDA-RD) has grants that could support community facilities and infrastructure or programs/initiatives that support rural economic development. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

Vermont Community Foundation (VCF) offers a couple of agriculture-related grant opportunities. Visit vermontcf.org/for-nonprofits/funds-and-programs for all grant programs, and vermontcf.org/climate-the-environment for climate and the environment funding opportunities.

Consider lenders such as Vermont Economic Development Authority (VEDA) which provides a handful of relevant funds at veda.org/ or Farm Credit East which supports a variety of farm and farm-related businesses at farmcrediteast.com/.

Cause IQ maintains a directory of Vermont-based grantmaking foundations. causeiq.com/directory/foundations-list/vermont-state/.

Town Initiatives and Existing Agricultural Networks

Find out what's happening in your area/region and what's worked well in similar or neighboring regions. Use the following list as a starting point for research.

Organic Valley's CROPP Cooperative functions as a network for dairy farmers that provides marketing, as well as diverse support and technical assistance. farmers.coop.

ACORN: acornvt.org.

Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance: crwfa.org.

Vermont Grass Farmers Association: vtgrassfarmers.org.

Vermont Vegetable & Berry Growers Association: vzbga.org/.

Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition: champlainvalleyfarmercoalition.com.

Greater Cabot Working Landscape Network: facebook.com/greatercabotworkinglandscapenetwork.

Vermont Farm to Plate Network: vtfarmtoplate.com/network.

Springfield Food Co-op: springfieldfood.coop/

Buffalo Mountain Market, Hardwick: buffalomountainmarket.com/

Caledonia Farmers' Market Association: caledoniafarmersmarket.com/

Morrisville Food Co-op: morrisvillecoop.com/

East Calais General Store (Community Trust Model): eastcalaiscommunitytrust.org/east-calais-general-store.

Food Connects: foodconnects.org/.

Green Mountain Farm to School: greenmountainfarmtoschool.org/.

Vermont Farmers Food Center: vermontfarmersfoodcenter.org/.

Center for an Agricultural Economy: hardwickagriculture.org/.

Intervale Center: intervale.org.

Guides and Other Resources

The National Good Food Network from the Wallace Center at Winrock International creates diverse, high-quality resources including webinars. Topics include Local Food in Retail: Two Models, One Goal; and Food Hubs: Viable Regional Distribution Solutions ngfn.org.

Additional resources can be found at the Food Co-op Initiative (fci.coop/) and the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (nfca.coop/).

RANDOLPH: Creative Economy



Randolph turned creative energy into a driver of downtown vitality by listening deeply and communicating consistently. Early community conversations revealed a rich but disconnected creative ecosystem, including galleries, live performances, local restaurants, and the Chandler Center for the Arts. Seeing the potential to connect these pieces, the town created a dedicated economic development role to sit at the center of these relationships. Through consistent storytelling and outreach, Randolph built the "Randolph Vibe," a shared identity celebrating creativity as both cultural and economic driver. The results have been tangible: The Chandler Center for the Arts is growing their attendance by 5% year over year, downtown now hosts five art galleries, and five new businesses have opened in the last six months. Success required balancing arts and culture with other priorities like housing and infrastructure.

Lesson: Creative economies grow strongest when woven into the broader fabric of community life and are sustained by consistent communication and dedicated capacity.

Boost the Arts and the Creative Economy

Vermonters value arts and culture. Given art's critical position in education and human development, its power in bringing people together, and its contribution to local economies, many Vermonters view the creative sector as central to our communities.

ACTION STEPS

1. Create an arts council/committee.

Put the word out that an arts council/committee is being formed. Invite and convene a working group of local leaders and community members focused on fostering and promoting the arts and the local creative economy. Include local artists and craftspeople, as well as business leaders, educators, youth, and other community leaders who could help with communications, event planning, and meeting coordination. For tips, see "Inviting the Public".

Connect with other arts committees and councils around the state to learn about how they got started. Two long-standing town arts committees are the Stowe Arts & Culture Council and the Brattleboro Town Arts Committee. Other committees and councils may be able to share tips and strategies as the group develops an action plan. The Vermont Arts Council has many resources on its website (vermontartscouncil.org).

Work with the committee to agree on your group's vision and role. For process tips, see "Developing a Community Vision."

2. Research community interests, needs, and assets.

Create an inventory or "asset map" of local arts resources and allies. Who is active in creative pursuits in your community? Ask them about their work, their views on the needs of local artists and craftspeople, and what they view as opportunities for growth in the creative economy. Include individuals and groups such as:

- Artists and craftspeople
- Schools, educators, and youth
- Faith groups
- Businesses and entrepreneurs
- Conservation groups
- Historic preservation groups
- Social or civic organizations
- Recreation Programs
- Libraries, youth and senior centers, and other community institutions

Survey the community. Distribute a public survey (ideally both paper and online) to gather ideas about your group's potential direction and activities.

Visit successful arts programs in other communities. Learn from their successes and make sure you will be supporting, rather than duplicating, each other's efforts.

3. Formulate and implement an action plan.

Based on community feedback, develop an overall mission statement, and set goals and priorities for the committee. Do you want to be an ad hoc group that advises the Town or do you have a vision to formally establish the council and its members with Select Board approval? What role will you play in the community – informational? Convening or planning events? Or an advisory role to municipal bodies? It is recommended to choose one focus and not try to do everything. (See "Setting Priorities for Action" and "Fostering Municipal-Community Partnerships.")

Implement your plan based on your mission statement and goals. If you aspire to be informational, begin gathering information and determine how/when you will share arts and cultural events in your community. If you wish to hold events, begin to develop programming that boosts the arts and the creative economy in your town or region. Start small with artist gatherings and other events and slowly build to include more events and programs and connect to more artists and community members. If you wish to be an advisory body to the Town, determine your structure (ad hoc or official) and in what ways you can be effective in advising Town policies and priorities. For the latter, contact your Town Manager or Planning Director to discuss the possibilities.

Looking for inspiration? Some of the initiatives that Vermont's community-based arts committees have taken on include:

- Creating a Community Arts Calendar to serve as a clearinghouse for local events and performances
- Hosting a signature event to be held regularly (dinner event, seasonal celebration, etc.). This helps increase organizational visibility. It could be a fundraiser (optional).
- Inventorying existing unused spaces for potential pop-up or permanent arts spaces. Leverage people and resources from your asset map to find ways to creatively use these spaces.
- Holding an open studio weekend for local artists
- Partnering with local schools to create a youth arts adjunct to your group and to encourage creative works by students for students
- Creating a musical instrument loan program
- Creating public art projects, both temporary and permanent, including statues, murals, sidewalk art, traffic safety signage, and more

4. Communicate, celebrate, and reflect.

Keeping the community informed about your efforts will increase participation and bring in new volunteers. Celebrate each activity as a success and treat it as an opportunity to inform the community about your work. Artistic projects often offer outstanding visuals that stand out in both traditional and social media—use them to your advantage. For outreach ideas, see "Communicating with the Community."

Take time with your team to reflect on your efforts. What's working? What's not? Have the needs of the community changed? Work with your team to evaluate and improve on your efforts.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

The Vermont Arts Council expands arts opportunities and energizes the creative economy through their grant-making work, the Vermont Creative Network, and other programs. Contact them at info@vermontartscouncil.org or visit vermontartscouncil.org and vermontcreativenetwork.org.

Creative Ground is a dynamic regional directory for New England's creative people and places. creativeground.org.

The Young Writers Project is a Vermont-based organization that seeks to support, mentor, promote, and publish young writers primarily between the ages of 13-19. youngwritersproject.org.

Vermont Crafts Council is a supporter and advocate for the high-quality craftsmanship that can be found throughout the Green Mountain State, and they organize the annual Vermont Open Studio Weekend. vermontcrafts.com.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

There are many Vermont groups engaged in community-level arts projects, events, and development. A selection of them include:

- The Memphramagog Artists Collaborative in Newport runs a cooperative gallery. maccenterforhearts.com.
- The Connecticut River Artisans Guild in Canaan runs events, classes, and pop-up galleries. connecticutriverartisans.com/.
- The Upper Valley Arts Alliance is a partnership of arts organizations in the Upper Valley region of Vermont, united by a shared mission to increase access to the arts for all. uvarts.org.
- The Civic Standard in Hardwick is a weekly supper club, public living room, and a collaborative art project. thecivicstandard.org/.
- BarnArts Center for the Arts in Barnard coordinates a year-round performing and visual arts program of workshops for adults and youth, exhibitions and performances, showcasing existing local talent and bringing in nationally recognized artists. barnarts.org.
- The Current, A Center for Contemporary Art in Stowe offers a range of dynamic programming, exhibitions, and educational resources that assert the value of the arts. thecurrentnow.org.

- River Arts in Morrisville is a multi-generational community arts organization that runs programming for youth and adults. It hosts events and maintains two galleries. riverartsvt.org.
- Island Arts is an arts group in North Hero that has been creating arts experiences and programming in the Champlain Islands for over 30 years. islandarts.org.
- Burlington City Arts is the city of Burlington's arts and education center. They have a long history of public programs, events, education, and exhibitions and a focus on nurturing a dynamic environment through the arts for broad audiences. burlingtoncityarts.org.
- Catamount Arts in St. Johnsbury has worked to make the arts a fundamental part of community life in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom for over 50 years. catamountarts.org.
- Brattleboro Museum & Arts Center is a vibrant non-collecting contemporary art museum focused on the work of living artists. They bring notable art and artists to Brattleboro and provide a platform for the region's many artistic talents. brattleboromuseum.org/.

Funding

The Vermont Arts Council offers a number of grants to artists, nonprofit organizations, and educators that support the arts and creative economies in their local communities. It also maintains a Resource Library with a number of other funding sources. vermontartscouncil.org.

Vermont Humanities has grants to support public humanities work across Vermont. vermonthumanities.org/grants/

Cause IQ maintains a directory of Vermont-based grantmaking foundations. causeiq.com/directory/foundations-list/vermont-state/

The Vermont Community Foundation could be a funding source for certain arts-focused projects. vermontcf.org.

The Arts Council of Windham County offers grants for community-focused creative projects in Brattleboro. artswindhamcounty.org/.

The Ben & Jerry's Foundation offers a number of grant programs for Vermont organizations. benandjerrysfoundation.org.

New England Foundation for the Arts offers grants to organizations and artists. nefa.org/grants-programs/grant-programs

The National Endowment for the Arts offers a number of grant opportunities for individuals and organizations to promote the arts. arts.gov.

Market Your Community to Visitors

Many of the things that make our Vermont towns great only reveal themselves over time; it can be hard for tourists to fully appreciate some of the slower treasures of this great state. But every community has assets that can be appreciated even by passers-by. Highlighting these in your town invites visitors to become traveling ambassadors for the community and to come back soon, which boosts local economies. It can even help inspire the arrival of new full-time residents and all the vitality they bring.

ACTION STEPS

1. Convene local partners.

Convene a meeting of local business owners, municipal leaders, representatives of your Chamber of Commerce, downtown organization, if you have one, and other interested residents to discuss the current tourism landscape and explore a common vision for the future.

Be sure to include those in the tourism sector, including restaurateurs, B&B owners, recreation organizations, and other businesses or services who stand to benefit from increased visitor traffic. Who has helpful experiences and perspectives to bring to the table?

Discuss your common goals and consider formalizing this group as a steering committee for your marketing efforts. For organizing tools, see “Developing a Community Vision” and “Setting Priorities for Action.”

2. Inventory your community’s tourism assets, needs, and opportunities.

Making a list of all the assets, needs, and opportunities in your community is a helpful early step in assessing the local tourist potential and can be used later to augment existing promotional materials. Consider:

- What might a first-time visitor notice about your community? Brainstorm a list, keeping in mind food, lodging, breweries, festivals and seasonal events, museums, hiking and biking trails, skiing and other outdoor recreation, water bodies, farms, wildlife, vistas, cultural landmarks, and the other elements that local people appreciate.
- What elements of your community might be lesser known, but would be appreciated by someone from out of town if they learned about them? These might include a back-road covered bridge, an orchard or farmstand, historical sites, or a nice place to walk by the river.
- What services would a visitor need to make their stay enjoyable?
- How would a visitor know how to discover the best of your community?

3. Develop a community marketing campaign.

Together, your group can look at ways to put out the word about your community. Here are some of the techniques used successfully in Vermont communities. For outreach ideas, see “Communicating with the Community.”

- Come up with a “pitch” –a narrative that you can share with the broader community about the importance of visitors to the local economy. This can be helpful in raising awareness of your initiative and gathering community support.
- A unified message or brand aimed at visitors can be to everyone’s benefit, and can even boost local pride of place. Your partnership could develop shared materials—brochures, town maps, business directories—to engage visitors’ attention and ensure that more businesses have opportunities to market themselves.
- Use your inventory from Step 2 to create a local directory of business and attractions. Identify any existing promotional materials and see if there are ways to consolidate them.
- Strategize the placement of hard-copy materials in visible central locations and businesses around town, and in neighboring communities if possible.
- Inventory and update downtown or village signage to help better direct visitors to local amenities and businesses.
- In the age of the smartphone traveler, having an effective online presence can be as important as robust hard-copy materials. Conduct a virtual inventory by entering likely queries into common search engines to see what resources pop up. Consider partnering with the municipality or downtown organization to create a unified online visitor portal and work with a web consultant to maximize visibility. This central hub could offer high-quality photo or video content, and a hyperlinked version of the local directory, providing visitors with a single gateway into the local community.
- Audit the community’s social media presence, and work with someone technologically savvy to build a social media campaign with unifying hashtags that highlight community happenings and local assets. This could be a local volunteer or grant-funded part-time position, depending on the scope of the campaign.
- Connect the campaign to local businesses and organizations. Leverage the partnerships you have developed to implement changes that make the town friendlier to visitors. These might include extended weekend and evening hours for businesses and restaurants, local street fairs or collaborative markets, guided tours, and other welcoming activities.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

The Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing can be a source for technical assistance. accd.vermont.gov/tourism.

Your Regional Development Corporation could be a partner in helping to design and implement a plan for marketing and tourism. See the list here: accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/resources/rdc.

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) could provide technical assistance and help to connect to communities that have run successful marketing campaigns. accd.vermont.gov/community-development.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) can be a source for planning grants or other types of grants to help boost marketing and tourism initiatives. accd.vermont.gov

USDA Rural Development can be a grant source to help support major marketing and tourism efforts that will drive economic development. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

Vermont Towns with Successful Marketing and Tourism Initiatives

- Island Pond Chamber of Commerce: visitislandpond.com/.
- Better Middlebury Partnership: experiencemiddlebury.com/about-the-bmp/.
- St. Johnsbury Chamber of Commerce: discoverstjohnsbury.com/.
- Kingdom Trails in East Burke: kingdomtrails.org/.
- Bennington Chamber of Commerce – “The Shires of Vermont”: exploretheshires.com/.
- Rutland County – I Love Rutland Campaign: downtownrutland.com/news/tag/I+love+Rutland+Vermont.

Community Infrastructure



Improve and Develop Housing

Many Vermont communities name housing as a pressing issue. Whether your community is focused on attracting new residents, retaining current families, diversifying housing for a range of income levels, or other goals, focusing on local housing needs will serve both economic and social needs.

ACTION STEPS

1. Convene a team and assess the local housing landscape.

Bring together community members interested in improving and developing housing. Interested participants might include local leaders, builders, potential housing residents, housing advocacy groups, and local citizens. Consider groups that may be underrepresented in local decision-making. Together, conduct fundamental background research.

Inventory the local housing stock using sources like housingdata.org where you can find the Housing Development Dashboard. Consider such questions as:

- How many of each type of dwelling exist in town?
- What is their condition, and their price point?
- What types of homes have been developed in your community in recent years?
- What is the ratio of rentals to owner-occupied units?
- Is there a pattern to where different types of housing are located ie. is all the affordable housing in one area?
- What does new construction cost in your area and what funding is available?
- Are there underutilized properties or existing structures that would be suitable for redevelopment or conversion to housing?

Conduct a needs assessment to identify demand for specific dwelling types, based on the demographic and economic makeup of the community and future goals. Use multiple sources of information: consult with local leaders, gather resident input at community events, and/or distribute a public survey. Your Regional Planning Commission can be a helpful resource in conducting this analysis, as they may already have much of the data. [Housingdata.org](https://housingdata.org) has easy-to-use demographic dashboards and can assist with visualizing information, but should be used in connection with local, on-the-ground knowledge and conversations. Consider such issues as:

- What housing needs exist now, and how might needs change in the future?
- What is the typical household size and income for people in your community?
- Are there gaps between the existing housing stock and the community's emerging needs? What are the most serious needs – Senior housing? Family units with more bedrooms? Workforce housing? Single rooms or small units?

- What types of homes help meet these gaps? Home types may include: Studio apartments, duplexes, fourplexes, condominium apartments, townhomes, accessory dwellings, common interest communities/cooperative housing, courtyard cottages, new subdivisions for residential streets and building lots, a large apartment building, special needs housing, etc.
- What physical characteristics are important? This may include: Accessibility, number of bedrooms, types of amenities, access to services or transit.
- Is the community looking to expand permanently affordable homes, market rate homes, shared-equity homes?
- What other local housing projects have been successful in the past? Connect with people who have local experience and learn from past initiatives.

2. Determine your project priorities.

Host one or several events to bring people interested in housing issues together with potential developers, and identify points of collaboration or mutual support. Not only will diverse perspectives add value to the project, but the planning process itself can serve as a launch point for future collaboration between groups. For ideas, see “Inviting the Public.” Potential stakeholders might include (but are not limited to):

- Realtors
- Landlords (non-profit and for-profit)
- Social service providers
- Shelter operators
- Faith groups
- Economic development professionals
- Renters
- Young people
- People struggling to find a home that meets their needs
- Building tradespeople
- Local lenders

Based on these discussions and the information gathered from the housing inventory and needs assessment, develop a plan for a housing project that suits the community needs. See housingdata.org/toolbox for more useful resources. For process ideas, see “Setting Priorities for Action.”

It can be helpful at this stage to partner with housing development professionals, as they can help navigate regulatory, logistic and financing hurdles. See below for contacts.

As you develop your housing plans, keep in mind affordability and inclusiveness. Communities thrive when they are welcoming and affordable to a wide variety of residents. Federal and state fair housing laws are designed to ensure equal access to housing and to dismantle historical patterns of segregation and exclusion.

3. Evaluate potential sites

Research and identify several possible locations for a project. Work with planning and design professionals, and others in , housing or historic preservation, to determine the best location, based on the type of project you will pursue, the community's housing needs, and broader community planning goals.

- If you decide to support a new development, research and identify land that is currently on the market, municipally-owned, or may be attainable.
- Consider who can gain site control: your municipality with a dedicated project manager, a local or regional development corporation, a non-profit housing developer, a community or housing trust, etc.
- If there are optimal sites that are not on the market, consider pursuing an option-to-buy agreement that provides a right of first refusal and allows for due diligence.
- Some projects are partly driven by an underused or even derelict building that presents an opportunity. Did the inventory from Step 1 reveal any existing buildings or properties that could be repurposed for housing?
- Consider the kinds of development constraints present on the property: covenants, permit conditions, deed restrictions, water/wastewater feasibility, building/zoning codes, wetlands, etc.
- Which sites best match with your housing needs? Opportunities may include: vacant lots or infill opportunities on existing infrastructure, a new subdivision/ neighborhood, and/or redevelopment of an existing building.

Feasibility studies with engineers and/or consultants may be needed to determine the best site for your project. This may include a preliminary site assessment with a civil engineer to determine if the site has any wetlands or sensitive environmental features. This information shapes the conceptual development plan, and is typically included in the RFP to provide a detailed understanding of the site and any limitations. See below for resources for funding and identifying the right consultant.

Connect with the local municipal or regional planning department to review existing building codes, zoning by-laws, the State Community Investment Program (Designated Centers and Neighborhoods), or other housing programs that may influence development.

Remember: your group doesn't have to do everything yourselves. Private developers, both for and non-profit, can be great partners for this phase of housing development!

4. Develop a conceptual site plan and engage the community.

Work with a team of housing development and design professionals to create an initial design for the project. Members may include architects and engineers, housing developers (non-profit or other), and builders. Keep in mind that available funding will influence the type of project and its feasibility. Inclusion of a developer at this stage will ensure that the design is grounded and will lead to a successful RFP response. Alternatively, consider how issuing a design competition for the site can generate ideas for the project and attract development partners to the table.

Invite the community to share their reactions and suggestions about the design. Engagement now will not only help inform and improve the design at a key moment, but will develop an awareness of the community's housing needs and how the project supports community goals. Consider how use of visuals and photo renderings can be used to dispel misconceptions of the project and address community concerns. Co-creating the project with the community will build support for the project early in the process.

5. Develop a feasibility analysis and funding plan.

What state and federal programs exist to help facilitate and fund housing development that might apply to the project? Contact ACCD for guidance and information on specific projects or initiatives, such as the Vermont Community Development Program or Homes for All.

Are there municipal actions that can be taken to leverage local funding? Successful examples in other communities include housing trust funds, property tax incentives, and revolving loan funds.

Work with your group of community stakeholders to identify potential donors or philanthropic groups.

Work with an experienced developer to create a budget for the project and match it with available funding sources. Make sure the project is financially viable before issuing an RFP to make sure responses are aligned with the community vision.

6. Identify professionals to implement the project.

Put out a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a developer to lead the housing project and carry out the proposed concept plan. Encourage developers to use the initial concept plan as a starting point, but be open to alternatives. Developers may need to modify the concept to make it financially viable. Partnership with developers earlier in the process can ensure that the concept design is feasible.

With the developer, put out an RFP for a General Contractor to lead construction.

Build a plan with the developer for ongoing property management and maintenance. The developer may lead management in the long term or contract with a third-party management entity.

7. Keep the community in the loop.

As early as possible in the process, designate one or several point people to inform and engage the community about your efforts. They can take the lead on posting regular updates and fielding inquiries from the public.

Develop a plan to share regular updates with the broader community about the status of the project. Consider engaging local media channels, community listservs, social media pages, public bulletin spaces, local mailings and newsletters. For ideas, see "Communicating with the Community."

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Your Regional Planning Commission (RPC) can be a key partner in helping to plan for and develop a local housing project. Find yours here: vapda.org/

Community Land Trusts and Housing Development Corporations are key local and regional partners in local housing development. Connect with the group that leads for your region:

- Addison Housing Works: addisontrust.org.
- Brattleboro Area Affordable Housing: baahvermont.org.
- Cathedral Square Corporation (statewide): cathedralsquare.org.
- Champlain Housing Trust: champlainhousingtrust.org. (Chittenden, Franklin & Grand Isle Counties).
- Downstreet Housing & Community Development (formerly CVCLT): downstreet.org. (Central Vermont).
- Cornerstone Housing Partners: housingrutland.org (Rutland, Addison and Bennington Counties).
- Evernorth: evernorthus.org/ (statewide).
- Randolph Area Community Development Corporation: racdc.com. (Braintree, Brookfield, and Randolph).
- Rural Edge: ruraledge.org. (Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans Counties).
- Twin Pines Housing Trust: tphtrust.org. (Bethel, Bradford, Bridgewater, Fairlee, Hartford, Hartland, Newbury, Norwich, Pomfret, Royalton, Sharon, Strafford, Thetford, Topsham, Tunbridge, Vershire, W. Fairlee, W. Windsor, Windsor, Woodstock; and adjacent New Hampshire towns).
- Windham and Windsor Housing Trust: homemattershere.org/.
- Winooski Housing Authority: winooskihousing.org/.

The Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB) makes grants and loans for the acquisition, rehabilitation and construction of affordable housing by nonprofit housing organizations. They can provide technical assistance and help to share successful projects in other communities. vhcb.org.

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) provides some great resources around planning for housing in your community. accd.vermont.gov/housing/planning

Evernorth can advise on everything from where to go for a feasibility analysis or market study, to funding construction. evernorthus.org/.

In the Upper Valley, Vital Communities' Workforce Housing Program can be a valuable partner. vitalcommunities.org.

Housing & Homelessness Alliance of Vermont (HHAV) can be a valuable resource in connecting to state and federal policymakers. helpingtohousevt.org/.

Vermont State Housing Authority: vsha.org/.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscric-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) can help with overall planning advice, downtown programs and more. accd.vermont.gov.

USDA Rural Development can provide funding for community housing projects. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

The Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) can be a grant funding source for planning or project development. Contact Tim Tierney at tim.tierney@vermont.gov, or 505-5496. nbrc.gov.

Other Guides, Tools, and Resources

Massachusetts resource for all phases of the housing development process: housingtoolbox.org/development-process

A comprehensive listing of Housing organizations and agencies in Vermont, compiled by the Department of Housing and Community Development: haccd.vermont.gov/sites/accdnew/files/documents/H-DIRECTORYOFORGANIZATIONS.pdf.

The Homes for All Initiative provides information, design guidance and support for small scale developers and housing projects. More information including toolkits, connection to resources and more can be found at accd.vermont.gov/current-initiatives/homesforall

Examples of Successful Community Projects

- Northern Forest Project in St. Johnsbury: northernforest.org/now-leasing-apartments-in-st-johnsbury/.
- Montpelier Taylor Street Apartments and Transit Center, Downstreet Housing: downstreet.org/development-project-taylor-street/.
- Barre Ward 5 School Apartments, Downstreet Housing: downstreet.org/ward-5-school-apartments.
- Middlebury Stonecrop Meadows: stonecropmeadows.com/.
- Bristol Village Co-Housing: bristolcohousing.com/.

Revitalizing Community and Historic Buildings

Are you considering a bricks-and-mortar project in your community? Whether you are looking to break ground on a new recreation center, renovate your grange hall, or just spruce up the village green's gazebo, here are some considerations. Rather than a "to-do" list, this overview looks at elements that contribute to a successful project. Each element will be unique to your project, audience, funders, knowledge involved, and more.

ACTION STEPS

1. People Power

People are key to successful projects. Who are the people who will drive your project forward?

Some projects grow organically, with the team or organization growing along with them. Others evolve under the guidance of a well-established non-profit or strong municipal leadership.

If you're establishing a new group or organization that will manage this project, pull together people with diverse skills that are complementary to your mission. Some groups have the in-house knowledge to navigate the complexities of any project, while others may need professional support along the way. Look for expertise in your community and explore ways to grow those skills when possible.

Allow community members to give in the way that is meaningful for them. Time, Talent, and Treasure are all critical to a successful project. Volunteers and small donors may develop into board members and large donors, especially for projects and places that are close to their heart. (For more on establishing an organization and board, see "Develop A Community Trust").

If you're reading this chapter, you may be leading the group or project in some capacity. As a leader, reflect on your own strengths, limitations, and preferences; you may want to ask a trusted friend for honest feedback. How do you communicate, how do you like to work through tasks or problem solve, how do you make decisions, how do you uplift or push back on others? And are those traits compatible with the people you're working with and the project you're working on? You and the group should all consider who on the team might be best suited to various roles that will come up. Be clear with roles, but don't be rigid – you may need to change them down the road.

Like any community effort, developing this idea starts with getting to know the broad range of perspectives about it in the community. Listen to and incorporate the community's fears, wants, needs, and ideas for how to get it done and invite individuals with differing points of view into the team. Your project will be strongest if you keep the full range of perspectives engaged along the way. See "Inviting the Public" and "Communicating with the Community."

2. Know Your Project

Every place has a history. A building tells its history through physical changes that met the needs of previous users. Speak with a professional about what it would take to make your location safe for its intended use, and think about limitations. This includes big things like structural safety, fire safety, and local building codes, but also includes things like adequate parking, ADA accessibility, and waste water capacity.

- Know your site. Research the local zoning. Become familiar with your site's water and wastewater systems. Will a historic or archeological review of the site be relevant? Is testing for hazardous materials (Hazmat) necessary? What physical work will be completed, and how will it impact the community?
- Confirm ownership. This may look different for different projects. Some projects may use federal funding that requires you to start with an "option agreement" until you can confirm the building is safe. Other paths to "ownership" are long term leases and outright purchase and sale.

3. Define Outcomes

Focus on the end use and be able to articulate why that is valuable to your community.

- What was the inspiration for this project? Did your community identify a need, and you found a building that could support that need? Or, is there an empty building that your community wants to see put back to use? (If the community has yet to decide what that building will become, consult the first several chapters of this Guide on how to convene the community to set vision and priorities.)
- Consult with experts who are well versed in developing or operating a building that serves a similar purpose. Ask for lessons learned and things to consider.
- Determine what planning has already been completed. This may include consulting land records or previous town plans. What are the physical changes that need to happen to the building so that it can meet your end need?
- Can you take small, meaningful steps to make the building safe and usable, or does the condition of the building require you to undertake significant rehabilitation?

4. Plan to Plan

Planning costs money and takes time, so incorporate both into your process. This iterative process will likely reach across multiple disciplines. The bigger the project, the more layers of complexity, which can push timelines out and budgets up by 10 to 20%. That's normal. Soft costs (design costs, legal fees, and other non-construction expenses) are frequently overlooked, but skipping ahead will only cost more time and money in the long run. Begin with exploratory tools such as:

- Building Assessment: A preliminary building assessment can help groups wrap their minds around a building and its physical needs. It helps answer the question, "what's here?" This assessment should be performed by a qualified professional with expertise in architecture, structural engineering, or a closely related field. The assessment will include a visual inspection of the building and document the state of structural, electrical, and mechanical systems.

- **Feasibility Studies:** These studies help answer “what’s possible,” and then explore those possibilities through design work. You may wish to work with a builder or architect who can make the jump from your building assessment to schematic plans. You could choose to do a market study or work through a business plan. It may be wise to do some testing for hazardous materials, and perform a site analysis that looks at water/wastewater capacity, zoning, and flood risk.
- **Budgeting:** Get an initial understanding of project costs, and begin thinking about funding. A firmly grounded budget will result in clearer fundraising goals, more successful grant proposals, and (hopefully) less sticker shock when the project goes out to bid. It also helps groups understand which types of funding are best suited to their projects. As you move forward, you will refine your budget and constantly re-evaluate the project with relation to cost.

5. Dive into Design

Design work evolves from the schematic level (information gathering and exploring options) through design development (selecting options and refining plans) to construction documents (final plans and specifications). How this process evolves and who is involved in this process will vary, depending on the project scale and the potential funding sources.

Your design will directly inform your budget. At each stage of design you will want to receive an estimate to ensure the project stays on budget. If an estimate is high, you will either have to perform value engineering (the process of reducing costs by discluding non-essential pieces of the project), or you will need to raise more money.

6. Budgeting and Fundraising

Project budgets come in all shapes and sizes. Some are small and focused on a discrete scope of work with very little soft costs or contingency. Some are multi-million dollar endeavors with many budget lines. See “Budgeting and Fundraising” for more information.

The spectrum of project budgets is broad, but there are a few things to consider regardless of budget size:

Project budgets encompass much more than just construction costs. A project budget is a zoomed out view of what it will cost to create this project from the time it is just an idea to the day you cut the ribbon and open the building. Budgets need to include expenses like soft costs (architecture, legal fees, studies, testing), contingencies (a percentage-based buffer to cover unforeseen costs), permits/fees, hazardous material abatement, water and wastewater engineering, and climate resiliency improvements. Some expenses may come into play earlier (like engineering) while expenses like contingencies may need to be adjusted several times over the lifecycle of the project.

Have a clear understanding of the payment schedules. When will expenses come in? Which funding source will cover them? What are the associated payment requirements? Will you need a loan to keep up with cash flow? This is a complicated thing to manage and we recommend working with a professional either through an organization that is providing technical assistance, or by finding a local community member with expertise in this field.

You may need both a Project Budget and an Annual Budget for maintenance. Ensure you have a plan to keep operating expenses separate from project expenses. Capital campaigns take a lot of work, but don't lose sight of development work that keeps the lights on.

7. The Big Question: Funding

This Guide is filled with resources and partners who may be able to support your project. But funding is rarely "free," so take the time to understand a potential funding source before launching into grant writing.

In general, there are more funding sources for construction expenses than pre-development work or operating support. Community groups typically shoulder more of the initial expenses to move the project from an "idea" to a clearly defined set of needs/outcomes. But once you know the project, it becomes easier to identify the right funding sources to support the work.

Local and state-level sources tend to be easier to access and administer than federal funding, but federal funding frequently comes with a larger pot of money. Know what you need and find the best (and easiest) source of funding to fit those needs.

Remember: Community fundraising is an essential part of most project budgets. Local dollars are the most flexible source of funding that can come in at any point in the project's progress. They are a key source of early planning expenses, frequently help meet grant-matching requirements, and demonstrate a high level of community support.

8. Begin Bidding and Administration

Projects need to follow the construction bidding and administration requirements of the funding sources and organizational/municipal regulations. Small projects may be able to do this work at local level with municipal staff or volunteers, but other projects will need professional support.

9. Keep Busy While the Work Unfolds

The above process will take upward of 6-12 months for a very small project and 3-5 years for a large project. You can be creative in how you fill the need while you wait. Think about what you are trying to do and test it out on a small and impermanent scale. This will also keep people excited and engaged in your efforts. For instance:

- If your group wants to reopen the general store, maybe you could work with local farmers and producers to host a pop-up market on your site all summer.
- If your group is hoping to create a coffee shop, you could set up a picnic table and pop up tent and grab a thermal coffee urn to host a weekly coffee hour.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Your Regional Planning Commission is often one of the best first stops for a community considering a capital project. RPCs can help communities understand planning requirements, identify potential funding sources, scope projects, connect with technical experts, and navigate state and federal programs. Visit vapda.org/ to find your RPC.

Your local Regional Development Corporation (RDC) can offer technical support and help connect you with business resources and relevant initiatives in your area: see accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/resources/rdc

The Vermont Small Business Development Center could help with Business Plan development. vtsbdc.org.

For historic buildings, the Preservation Trust of Vermont could be a key partner for consultation, project development assistance, fiscal counseling and potential grant support if a building is over fifty years old. ptvermont.org.

The Vermont Division for Historic Preservation could also provide information about how to rehabilitate and use historic buildings, and provide information about any financial resources available for that purpose. accd.vermont.gov/historic-preservation.

The Vermont Community Investment Program provides technical assistance, planning support, tax incentives, and access to funding for communities working on downtown and village-center revitalization. accd.vermont.gov/community-development/community-investment-program-cip.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

The Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP) provides Community Development Block Grant funding to eligible municipalities for community development projects, including eligible infrastructure, housing, economic development, and public facility activities. Projects often require substantial planning and municipal involvement, so communities should connect with their Regional Planning Commission and VCDP early in the process. See accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp for more information.

The Vermont Community Foundation may have funding to support your project. vermontcf.org.

The Vermont Department of Buildings and General Services has a Building Communities grant program that can fund community facilities projects. bgs.vermont.gov/commissioner/building-communities-grants.

The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development lists and can help you understand State and Federal Tax Credits that your project may qualify for. See accd.vermont.gov/historic-preservation/funding/tax-credits

Preservation Trust of Vermont's Robert Sincerbeaux or Paul Bruhn Funds can support assessments and development. ptvermont.org/.

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board's Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) program and feasibility funding can support more in-depth planning, especially for those projects that are likely to enter the VHCB pipeline. vhcb.org/redi/.

USDA's Rural Business Development Grant is a good resource for projects that will have a "benefiting business" like community-owned stores and eateries. rd.usda.gov/programs-services/business-programs/rural-business-development-grants

Your Regional Planning Commission may have other programs to support different layers of pre-development, like hazardous materials testing or brownfield clean up. See vapda.org/ to find your town's Regional Planning Commission.

The Northern Border Regional Commission could provide planning and implementation grants. nbrc.org.

LONDONDERRY: Housing



Londonderry shows how everyday residents, willing to learn as they go, can build lasting capacity to tackle a complex issue like housing. The One Londonderry Community Visit in 2021 named housing a top priority. A small group with little formal housing experience stepped up, starting with conversations that revealed a key gap: the town needed data before it could act. With the Select Board's support, they conducted a data-driven housing needs assessment using surveys and community input, building a shared foundation with municipal partners. As their expertise grew, the group was designated as an official Housing Commission, aligning housing efforts with related municipal areas like wastewater and land-use planning. They've since championed housing-friendly bylaws and helped advance regional groups such as the Community Fund for Londonderry and the Mountain Towns Housing Project. Team members continue to build lasting capacity by engaging with other housing advocates through the Windham Regional Commission and the Springfield and Southeast Vermont Housing Coalitions.

Lesson: Build understanding before solutions, align across boards where issues intersect, and remember that leadership capacity itself is the foundation for lasting change.

Advance Village Wastewater Infrastructure

One of the key elements of village or downtown development is often water or sewer infrastructure. As communities across the state are making plans for next stage economic development, they are faced with the challenge of developing the infrastructure needed to support future growth and business development and sustain a healthy and clean environment. While launching a large infrastructure project may seem like a daunting prospect, many Vermont communities are hard at work towards accomplishing their goals, and help is available. Here are some of the steps involved.

ACTION STEPS

1. Build Community Partnership

Meet with local government leadership to ensure that the planning commission, Select Board, city council, and/or village trustees are supportive in a water or sewer project.

Meet with non-governmental community members to assess their interest in the project. Keep the whole community informed and be particularly sure to reach out to those who will be directly affected by the project (e.g. village businesses and residents). See "Communicating with the Community."

Do some team learning and consulting with experts to understand the various options available and the steps a community needs to take to pursue water, wastewater, and stormwater improvements. This is complex and technical work, so it can help to develop a general understanding as a team of the work ahead and the possibilities available to the community. See the guides and other resources linked in the Resources section below for more details and background on these projects.

2. Gather Data on Needs and Project Feasibility

Conduct a survey of the community to determine public opinion on the existing systems, current needs, and appetite for infrastructure development. (See below for state help designing a survey.)

Conduct technical and financial feasibility studies. Identify state and federal funding options to hire an engineering consultant to conduct the study (see resources below).

Create a Request for Proposals (RFP) to identify and select an engineering consultant.

3. Project Design

Based on the engineering study and community input, work with a consultant and technical assistance providers to design a system that meets community needs. The design phase typically involves land acquisition, topographic survey, detailed design of pipes, treatment, and disposal systems. This step ends with detailed final design plans, technical specifications, permits, permanent and temporary easements, draft contract

documents for bidding, and a detailed Project Cost Summary. Concurrently municipalities need to hold a bond vote and apply for funding and financing. In this step, the community will move from a feasibility study towards a preliminary engineering report – this process will provide a more detailed look at the scope and cost of the project.

4. Keep the Public Informed and Engaged

Keep the community informed and engaged in your efforts throughout the project. Offer multiple opportunities for the community to learn more and express opinions, and incorporate their suggestions as you progress. (See “Communicating with the Community”).

Create informational materials that describe the project design. Give an honest, balanced assessment of both the costs and benefits for the community. Include the projected development impacts the project will have on the community, economic benefits, and the impacts and benefits to non-users/taxpayers.

Build public understanding of the project. Outreach and communication elements could include public meetings, printed and online informational materials, tabling at events, educational workshops, a non-binding resolution at Town Meeting Day, or other strategies to build public understanding and engagement. See the “Tools” section of this guide for a variety of resources on inclusive participation and facilitating effective meetings.

5. Implement and Construct

Bidding of the construction project will need to follow the requirements of the funding sources: many wastewater funding sources require formal federal procurement procedures. Work with community leadership, engineering experts, and technical assistance providers to implement project plans. Municipalities will also need to create ordinances, billing systems, and other administrative infrastructure to support the water utility.

This is a multi-stage effort, and you will want a skilled team to ensure the best outcomes for your community. See below for technical assistance and resources.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Your local Regional Development Corporation (RDC) and/or Regional Planning Commission (RPC) can offer technical support and help connect you with professionals and experts in your area. Find your RDC here: accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/resources/rdc, and your RPC here: vapda.org/.

USDA Rural Development can provide technical assistance even if USDA RD funds are not being used for the project. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for contact information.

The Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation Village Wastewater Solutions Initiative is a key resource to support local work on the development of wastewater systems. They can help with models for survey development and sample RFP templates as well as identifying potential engineering firms. dec.vermont.gov/village-wastewater.

The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) can provide technical assistance to communities on water infrastructure planning. rcapsolutions.org/state/vermont/.

The Vermont Rural Water Association can provide free technical assistance to communities on water infrastructure planning. Contact Liz Royer, Executive Director, at lroyer@vtruralwater.org, 802-660-4988. vtruralwater.org.

The Vermont League of Cities and Towns provides municipal assistance, support, and advice. They can help to answer legal or operational questions and could connect to other communities with successful initiatives. vlct.org.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

USDA Rural Development has grant and loan funds that can support the planning and construction of water/wastewater and stormwater infrastructure projects. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for contact information.

VT Department of Environmental Conservation can provide Engineering Planning Advances as well as State Revolving Fund Loans for planning, design, and construction of eligible water infrastructure projects. dec.vermont.gov/water-investment/water-financing

If your wastewater infrastructure is directly tied to increasing housing, you could explore the new Community and Housing Infrastructure Program (CHIP) financing tool which can support financing for the infrastructure needed to support that housing: accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/vepc/chip

If your project includes aspects of stormwater management, it could draw additional funds from the VT Department of Environmental Conservation Water Investment Division including the Ecosystem Restoration Program and the Clean Water Fund. dec.vermont.gov/about-dec/divisions/water-investment.

Municipal Planning Grants at the Agency of Commerce and Community Development could support feasibility and engineering studies. accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/municipal-planning-grant.

Vermont Community Development Block Grants are a potential funding source. accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp.

The federal Economic Development Authority could provide planning/implementation grants.

Vermont Housing Conservation Board has funding to help local groups hire grant writers to fund community and economic development projects. vhcb.org/redi.

The Northern Border Regional Commission could provide planning and implementation grants. nbrc.org.

Vermont Towns that Accomplished Projects or are Moving Forward on Wastewater Solutions:

- Warren
- Addison Four Corners
- South Londonderry
- Wolcott
- West Burke
- Montgomery Center
- Waitsfield & Irasville
- Highgate Center
- Jericho Riverside Village

Guides and other Resources

The overall steps and guidance in this document is in part modeled after a detailed guide from RCAP Solutions on “Getting Your Project to Flow Smoothly;” you can find a detailed guide on the Agency of Natural Resources website here: [nt Communities](https://www.naturalresources.comunities.org/)” which provides more detailed guidance around many of the steps listed above. Find that document here: accanrweb.vt.gov/DEC/IronPIG/DownloadFile.aspx?DID=127089&DVID=0

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Affairs has a guide titled “Wastewater Solutions for Vermont” available at d.vermont.gov/sites/accdnew/files/documents/CD/CPR/DHCD-Planning-WW-Treatment-Options-Guidance.pdf

“Advancing Community Wastewater Infrastructure: Strategies for Building Public Support” - a very recent and valuable resource from the UVM Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships. This is available at the Town of Jericho’s website: jerichovt.org/DocumentCenter/View/1316/2026-Advancing-Community-Wastewater-Infrastructure---Support-Strategies

MONTGOMERY: Village Wastewater

Montgomery, a small town is steering a technically complex infrastructure project to completion through steady, community-grounded leadership. After a Community Visit in 2019, residents identified village wastewater as a top priority. A citizen-led committee, intentionally separate from the Selectboard, first scoped the project and gathered public input, building trust before the technical work began. As the project advanced, the committee shifted into an advisory and outreach role while the Selectboard took the lead on the growing technical and financial demands: engaging engineering firms, conducting feasibility and site assessments, securing state and federal funding, and navigating permitting requirements. The team continually adjusted its approach as funding realities shifted and technical needs evolved. The project has now gone out to bid, with groundbreaking expected within the year.

Key Lesson: As projects grow more technical, leadership must evolve, pairing steady community engagement with the right expertise at the right time.



Expand Local Internet Connectivity

Reliable internet access has become a basic requirement for daily life in rural Vermont. From telehealth appointments and remote work to online learning, civic participation, and running a small business, connectivity now shapes whether residents can fully engage in their community and economy.

Communities are responding by creating public WiFi hotspots and partnering with local Communication Union Districts to expand residential broadband. These forward-looking efforts not only support residents but also make towns more attractive to tourists, businesses and employers. By closing infrastructure gaps, Vermont towns advance equity, foster economic development, and send a clear signal that rural communities are open for business.

ACTION STEPS

1. Build a team to assess needs and ideas

Form a diverse local team

Invite interested community members – local leaders, business owners, remote workers, students, retirees, and newcomers – to collaborate. Aim for a group that reflects different parts of town life. For tips, see “Inviting the Public.”

Engage regional partners early

Reach out to your Regional Planning Commission, Development Corporation, Chamber of Commerce, and Communication Union District (CUD). These partners can help identify funding, connect you with service providers, and share statewide and regional initiatives.

Host a public forum to set direction

If your community hasn't yet decided whether to pursue public WiFi hotspots, expanded broadband, or both, hold a well-advertised public forum to discuss options and gather input. For guidance, see “Framing a Process for Public Engagement” through “Setting Priorities for Action.”

Gather information through community research

Use one-on-one conversations, surveys or focus groups to answer key questions:

- What is the current broadband coverage in town?
- Where is WiFi already available in the downtown or village center?
- What speeds are residents actually experiencing (via speed tests)?
- How much would community members be willing to pay for improved bandwidth?
- Does your town plan prioritize expanding broadband connectivity?

- What support can your regional CUD offer (technical guidance, data, peer connections, resources)?
- What internet service providers (ISPs) serve your area, and what steps are they taking toward statewide service goals?
- Which locations or businesses experience high foot traffic and could serve as WiFi hubs?
- How might community WiFi hotspots affect businesses that currently attract customers with free WiFi?

2. Develop a plan

Whether your community prioritizes expanding residential broadband or creating public WiFi access in the town center, you'll need a clear plan for engaging experts, coordinating partners, and managing installation and maintenance. Below are starting points for each approach.

A Community Wifi Hotspot provides free or paid internet in a specific area – such as a downtown park, public building or local business.

- Identify a “project ambassador.” Choose someone who can coordinate with local partners, property owners, and technicians.
- Select the hotspot location and system type: Open or password secured? Free or fee-based service? Coverage area (small, roughly 150ft, or larger)? Indoors or outdoors?
- Hire an experienced contractor who will help determine the right system for your needs, manage installation, and set up software for public access and remote tech support.
- Identify a local moderator who can oversee basic operation, troubleshoot issues, and coordinate maintenance.
- Name and promote the network. Choose a clear, recognizable network name. Share it through the town website, flyers, and local social media so residents and visitors know it's available.

Common hardware brands include Cisco/Meraki, Aerohive, Aruba, Ruckus

Broadband Expansion is a long-term effort to bring high-speed fiber to every home.

- Work with your CUD or representatives from the Department of Public Service to plan a comprehensive feasibility study. This may involve hiring a consultant or organizing local trained volunteers.
- Conduct a feasibility study to include an inventory of existing infrastructure and an assessment of economic, physical, and legal hurdles to expanding access in your community.
- Build a case for increased connectivity. Use survey responses and public input (from Step 1) to demonstrate community need. Consider impacts on public safety and first-responders, existing businesses and remote workers, telehealth and online counseling, remote learning and digital access.

- Coordinate with utilities and ISPs. Explore partnerships that use existing phone or electric poles to reduce cost and complexity.
- Align with municipal infrastructure projects. Ask municipal leaders about upcoming projects – such as wastewater or road work – that could be paired with fiber installation to save money.
- Consider joining a communications union district (CUD). CUDs help small towns access larger grants, share expertise, and negotiate collectively.
- Keep the community informed. Provide regular updates, answer questions, and seek public support. Once you have a clear plan and community buy-in, you're ready to begin working with an Internet Service Provider (ISP).

3. Communicate, educate, and gather support

Keep the public informed throughout the project. Share regular updates on the town website, social media, and community listservs so residents understand what's happening and how they can participate. For engagement ideas, see "Communicate with the Community."

Make sure communication is two-way. Offer opportunities for discussion – through office hours, surveys, or informal conversations – and help people get their questions answered. Public input will shape your work; adjust your project as needed based on what you hear.

Host a public event to walk through your proposal, answer questions, and gather feedback. See "Managing Effective Meetings" for tips.

When a project is ready, seek endorsement from local officials, business owners, and community leaders. A clear statement of purpose with broad support can send a powerful signal to service providers and funders about the town's unified commitment.

Celebrate milestones along the way. Sharing progress, recognizing volunteers, and highlighting the benefits of improved connectivity builds trust, maintains momentum, and helps recruit new supporters for this project – and the next one.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Vermont Department of Public Service (PSD) is the key contact at the State and can help the community explore available options. publicservice.vermont.gov.

Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) facilitated the e-Vermont Community Broadband Project and the Vermont Digital Economy Project. Checkout some toolkits and stories from those efforts here: vtrural.org/past-initiatives/.

NEK Broadband is a CUD in the Northeast Kingdom. nekbroadband.org.

East Central (EC) Fiber is a CUD that has been serving parts of Washington, Orange and Windsor Counties for nearly a decade. ecfiber.net.

Your local Regional Planning Commission (RPC) can help convene state experts, regional entities and other potential collaborators. Find your area RPC here: vapda.org/.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

The Vermont Department of Public Service (PSD) offers Broadband Innovation Grants that are designed to help local communities forward local broadband. The Vermont State Connectivity Initiative has grant funding for internet service providers that agree to extend service to designated areas least likely to be served through the private sector or through federal programs. Towns are encouraged to work with an internet service provider to identify projects that will meet private and public needs: publicservice.vermont.gov/connectivity.

The Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) has grant funds available for telecommunications and economic development projects. nbrc.gov.

USDA Rural Development has grant/loan programs that might be useful (in particular the Rural Business Development Grant). Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD)'s Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP) grants can help defray some of the cost associated with conducting a feasibility study and planning broadband roll-out. accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp.

Other Guides and Resources

The Vermont Department of Public Service has information about broadband deployment and more. publicservice.vermont.gov/vermont-community-broadband-board-vcbb/bead-broadband-equity-access-and-deployment-program.

VCRD's e-Vermont "Planning and Implementing a Wi-Fi zone for your Town" is a more detailed, comprehensive version of the action steps above. See the full guide here: vtrural.org/past-initiatives/e-vermont/toolkit/.

Community Connections and Civic Engagement



Expand and Improve Community Communications

In a world teeming with global information sources competing for our attention, many communities feel the need to step up their local communication tools to build community connection and unity. Here are some of the actions Vermont towns have taken to increase and improve their local communication channels, and along the way, strengthen the community.

ACTION STEPS

1. Gather a Team to Inventory the Communications Landscape

Organize a group of people interested in improving communication in your town. Be as inclusive as possible in creating this group; this will help make sure your work is well informed and effective. You may take some or all of these steps.

Make a list of the groups, organizations, or committees operating in town including the youth clubs and the informal recreation or cultural groups. Now consider: What channels of communication currently exist between them?

- How do residents access information about groups and activities in town?
- How do residents communicate with larger groups, and with one another?
- Which people (and networks) in town are focal points of information?

Develop a list of the major gaps in communication. What obstacles create these gaps? Consider:

- Geography / topography
- Connectivity (internet and other means)
- Political and social divisions
- Language barriers
- Economic divisions
- Accessibility (physical, cognitive)
- Educational disparities
- For further exploration, see "Including Diverse Leadership and Participation in Community Processes."

Develop and distribute a community survey to gather ideas on residents' preferred methods of communication and what they think might be missing today.

2. Expand existing tools and explore new ones.

As your team examines communications options, consider the following media:

- The town website

- Is it user-friendly? Easy to find what you need? Does it share events and news beyond just town business? Is there willingness and capacity to broaden what is shared on that site?
- Does the town's website integrate well with major search engines? Does the town website support push technology (RSS feeds)?
- For a webinar hosted by the Vermont Arts Council on improving website visibility, [youtube.com/watch?v=KZoeIBMIHJE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZoeIBMIHJE). Consider working with a consultant to improve website accessibility and visibility, and/or try reaching out to see if someone in your town might volunteer website skills.
- Front Porch Forum or other community listserv platforms. Consider a campaign to increase the use of these local communications platforms.
- An online and/or printed community calendar distributed among residents and local businesses/organizations.
- A centrally located, regularly curated bulletin board with community updates.
- A monthly or quarterly newsletter mailed and/or emailed directly to residents.
- Municipal social media presence:
 - Is someone posting regular updates and events to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram?
 - What hashtags exist to track community happenings? Could new ones be created?
- Partnering with local radio and tv stations to promote events

For additional ideas, see "Communicating with the Community."

3. Improve communications tools, access, and use.

Consider establishing a single online communications hub to serve as a clearinghouse for all town events and public information. This hub can contain links to all the major online resources in town. Encourage local groups and organizations to post content to this hub, and to link from their own sites. If this is successful, it will make it simple for residents to find information and make it easier for organizers to get the word out.

Develop a system for engaging individuals and families lacking internet.

- Inventory physical locations with high foot-traffic for potential public bulletin boards or sandwich boards.
- Ask the municipality, local utilities companies, and other organizations about collaborating on direct mailings to residents (e.g. inserting informational flier with bills).
- Engage local media including print, radio, and television.
- Discuss communication strategies with local organizations such as the library, senior center, and Meals on Wheels.

Bring together local groups with frequent public and intergroup communications and strategize a system of coordination and mutual support.

- Event cross-promotion can multiply your message and introduce organizations to new audiences.

- Agreeing to a common schedule or posting protocol can reduce competition and maximize community contact.
- Facebook and other social media can be useful tools for inter-group discussion, gathering commentary, and scheduling events.

Consider establishing a paid or volunteer public administrator position to coordinate town communications. Duties could include:

- Maintaining the municipal information hub.
- Fielding public questions or suggestions.
- Tracking the community calendar and sending reminders to organizations to post on Front Porch Forum and other listservs.
- Staffing a table at public events to raise awareness of the town's information hub and signing people up for local listservs.
- Creating and distributing public flyers and other printed materials.

4. Tell the story.

Convene a diverse cross-section of community members to develop a shared vision for a municipal narrative: a public outreach campaign that highlights what makes your community a great place to live.

Utilize all the new and reinvigorated communication channels and partnerships above to share this story with the broader community.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Front Porch Forum can help support a local campaign to increase participation in the local forum. frontporchforum.com.

Talk to other Vermont communities and local newspapers about ways they have worked together to share positive local news.

The Vermont Arts Council may be able to post local arts events on the statewide Arts Calendar. vermontartscouncil.org.

Contact the VT Council on Rural Development (VCRD) for advice and support and to connect to other communities focusing on communications and connection. vtrural.org.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscric-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

The Vermont Community Foundation could have grant programs available that would contribute to events or event series – especially if they engage youth and bring the community together. vermontcf.org.

The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) may provide grants and technical support as well as tax credits in Designated Downtown and Village Centers.

- For the Designated Downtown Program visit accd.vermont.gov/community-development/designation-programs/downtowns.
- For the Designated Village Center Program. accd.vermont.gov/community-development/designation-programs/village-centers.
- For the Community Development Block Grant Program. accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp.

USDA Rural Development Business Enterprise Grants or Rural Business Opportunity Grants could be accessed for branding that helps local businesses. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

Guides and Other Resources

There are some great examples across Vermont of community calendars, websites, and social media that are helping with communications (and places where you might share your events as well):

- Neighbor to Neighbor in Hardwick: hardwickneighbors@gmail.com.
- Barre Up: barreup.org/.
- Rutland Chamber of Commerce (they post events for the whole region): rutlandvermont.com/rutland-killington-regional-calendar-of-events.
- Vermont Calendar of Events: search “events” at vermontvacation.com or find a statewide director at vermont.com/calendar.
- Craftsbury Community Events calendar. Search “events” at craftsbury.gov.
- What’s Next Middlesex? whatsnextmiddlesex.org/.

Develop Events that Strengthen Community

Event planning is its own art form. Of course, event planning rarely goes in a straight line—expect to circle back as new information emerges about funding, venues, participants, and because it's Vermont, the weather. But if you stay flexible and positive, the rewards of bringing people together are sweet, and the very act of dreaming and organizing together builds community. Here are some of the steps that have helped Vermont communities develop great events.

ACTION STEPS

1. Gather and prepare with an events committee.

Bring together people in the community who are interested in creating events. You'll need a variety of skills and interests, and enthusiasm is a great asset. Together, take some of the following steps:

- Build a list of events that already happen in your community. Do they happen every year? Who puts them on? How are they shared?
- Talk with the people who have hosted events in recent years, to determine the gaps and needs. Is there a need for more support, coordination, or volunteers for existing events? What types of events are missing?
- Survey the community (including all ages of kids and adults) to determine what types of events people would like to participate in. This could be a formal survey (print and online) and/or could include conversations with community groups (local boards, clubs, youth/parent/senior groups, etc.), and other outreach.
- Identify any previous events or event series that may have gone dormant. Sometimes it's easier to revive or makeover an old successful program than start from scratch.
- Develop and maintain a local community events calendar. You can do this even before you launch any new events, and supplement as new events are created. It can become the one-stop shop to post happenings and to find out what's going on.
- As you build your committee, consider intentionally including people of different ages and backgrounds so that intergenerational perspectives shape the events from the start.
- Ask committee members to help identify local skills such as gardening, canning, woodworking, storytelling, sugaring, fishing, technology, music that could be shared through workshops or demonstrations. Adding a few questions about skills people can teach or want to learn can help you build a foundation for future skill-sharing events.

2. Plan your event(s).

Develop your event goals and objectives. What do you hope to achieve and how will you know if you have succeeded? For instance: Is this an educational or networking event? A gathering to celebrate a community element (history, nature, the arts)? Which audiences do you most wish to reach? How many people do you hope will attend? Is this a fundraiser, and if so, what is your fundraising goal? Set clear and reasonable goals and expectations. For tips, see “Setting Priorities for Action.”

Determine how many events you want to plan for the year ahead. Different communities have chosen to organize:

- Annual events. Some towns host one signature celebration every year, such as a community-wide festival or Old Home Day celebration. These are often large-scale events that bring together partners from local business, restaurants, and volunteer organizations.
- Seasonal events. Some towns plan a large event three or four times throughout the year, for example, a winter carnival, a spring maple festival, a summer music or art festival, and a fall foliage or harvest fair.
- Recurring events. Some towns gather the community through a music series, community potlucks or picnics, open mic nights, trivia nights, or other traditions.
- One-time events. Perhaps it's a special anniversary, or perhaps you'd just like to try out a new idea. Who knows, it might catch on!
- As you plan, consider weaving skill-sharing and intergenerational components into your events. A fall festival might include a canning workshop, a spring “how to sugar” demonstration, or it could be a potato-bar paired with a local history presentation. A winter event could feature craft circles, story-time led by elders, or youth-taught technology help sessions. Discussion-based dinners, garden tours, haunted hikes, and outdoor skill demonstrations can all be designed to bring generations together while celebrating local knowledge.

Establish clear roles for volunteers. What needs to be done and who will be responsible for each task? Identify the point person (and possibly a subcommittee) for each key activity. Establish a structure for regular check-ins so everyone stays on the same page. Categories include:

- Fundraising and Bookkeeping.
- Promotion and Publicity: Mailings, advertising, online/social media.
- Site Logistics: Building or tent details, stage, chairs and sound system. If this is an outdoor event, what is your plan for bad weather?
- Speakers, artists or entertainers (if relevant).
- Food (if it will be featured—plus plates, cups, utensils, napkins).
- Registration/RSVPs (if needed).
- Set Up and Clean Up.

Secure a date and venue.

- Be sure you have chosen a date that gives ample time to organize and get the word out.
- Double-check that the date doesn't compete with other big events (sports, school events or breaks, religious holidays).
- Be sure the venue is suitable for the size and needs of the gathering.

Create an event timeline/master plan.

- Between now and the event, set deadlines for key elements of publicity, fundraising, and other categories.
- Build a day-of timeline for a seamless event. Plan out the flow of the day of the event, and who will be responsible for each task on that day, from set up to clean up. If possible, take a moment at the event itself to acknowledge and thank the key volunteers.

3. Establish Budget and Funding.

Develop a clear and detailed budget for your event. Be sure to include all the costs, from publicity to venue, rentals, food, talent. (See "Budgeting and Fundraising").

Develop a fundraising plan that covers the budget and is realistic based on your community and your goals. Sources of income might include:

- Admission fees.
- Sponsorships and in-kind donations from area businesses. You can offer to thank businesses and place their ads/logos in event materials; highlight this as a business opportunity for increased visibility and community-oriented branding.
- Fundraising events (some groups hold one or two fundraisers annually to support costs of events throughout the year). These might include silent auctions, raffles, and other methods.
- Grants. It could be helpful to partner with an existing non-profit to help raise and process grant monies.

4. Promote your event(s).

One of the most important parts of hosting a successful community event is getting the word out and making sure everyone feels welcome. See "Inviting the Public" and "Communicating with the Community" for suggestions.

Reminders for promoting community events:

- Integrate efforts with neighboring municipalities' events. Submit postings to surrounding towns' and regional calendars.
- Consider sharing your event live on social media. Broadcasting through various media channels could help to spread awareness of the series and fuel interest in future events.

- Use multiple methods of communication. Think about the various ways people get their news, including flyers, posters, sandwich boards, newspaper/radio/tv calendars, websites, social media (Front Porch Forum, Facebook, list serves, etc.)

5. Check-in, share, celebrate.

Send thank-you notes to volunteers and key participants. Supporting people's volunteer spirit will not only strengthen community but also be critical to the success of future events.

Be sure to celebrate the contributions of residents who shared their skills whether teaching a craft, leading a nature walk, demonstrating a traditional practice, or offering tech help. Recognizing both youth and elders who stepped into leadership roles reinforces the value of intergenerational learning and encourages future participation.

Share your event's successes. You can:

- Post on social media and through local networks – share pictures and stories.
- Write a press release to local media with information on how many attended and upbeat quotes from participants. Include photos if possible.

If possible, post all recordings and material online in a publicly accessible central location, and link to this hub from other locations. Keeping records can increase your chances of obtaining future funding and sponsorship.

Record performances and share on social media.

Check in and debrief with the event committee after the event. What worked, what did you learn, what would you do differently in the future? Keep a list of successes and challenges to inform future event planning.

Just a sampling of the many types of events that have strengthened Vermont communities:

- Weekly open-mic nights featuring local talent.
- Community scavenger hunt.
- Book, clothing, or seed swaps.
- "Fix-It Nights": People with repair, maintenance, or sewing skills work together with community members to make minor fixes to electronics, mechanical equipment, or clothing.
- Community play readings or community theater events.
- Event series based on a theme, for instance: celebrating local history, diversity, a pressing local issue, features of the natural landscape, agricultural landmarks, astronomical events, and more
- Weekly concert series and street closings: "Friday Night Live" in Rutland.
- Livestock shows.
- Farmers markets.
- Pick-up sporting events: Everything from soccer to ultimate Frisbee to softball to human foosball!

- “ ____ Hop” events (or “walks” or “crawls”) featuring arts, music, food and drink tastings, or different activities at businesses, home porches, or community locations around town.
- Local “American Idol”-style singing competitions.
- The “Newlywed Game” with local couples.
- Maple festivals.
- 5K Races or other running and/or biking events.

Additional skill-sharing and intergenerational ideas:

- Canning workshops with local gardeners.
- Garden tours and plant-swaps.
- Story circles featuring elders and youth.
- Outdoor skill demonstrations (fishing, sugaring, foraging).
- Community cafés with rotating volunteer hosts.
- Community dinners or neighborhood brunches.
- Haunted hayrides or haunted hikes.
- Multi-day skill-share festivals where anyone can teach or learn something.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Your local Chamber of Commerce can offer valuable help in connecting to the business community.

Your local Regional Planning Commission (RPC) will have experience hosting events and may be able to offer advice or technical assistance. Find yours here: vapda.org/.

The Vermont Calendar of Events is a statewide directory. vermont.com/calendar_index.cfm.

The Vermont Arts Council may be able to offer helpful tips and resources for promoting events and connecting to local artist networks. Contact Kira Bacon, head of communications, at kbacon@vermontartscouncil.org, or 828-5422. vermontartscouncil.org.

The Vermont Creative Network, an offshoot of the Arts council, is a great opportunity to connect with other community organizers across the state. vermontartscouncil.org/vermont-creative-network.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

Vermont Community Foundation may have grants available for community projects or events, especially where they will connect the community and/or engage youth. vermontcf.org.

Art Impact Grants at Vermont Arts Council can be a funding source.
vermontartscouncil.org.

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) may have resources for funding and can offer technical support, especially in Designated Villages and Downtowns. Visit accd.vermont.gov for contact information for the Downtown Program Coordinator, Grants Specialist, and Community Development Block Grants Specialist.

Vermont Arts Council Creative Aging Grants.

Vermont Community Foundation Spark Connecting Communities.

AARP Community Challenge Grants.

Local business sponsorships for workshops or festivals.

Examples of Local Events and Events Committees Around the State

Wallingford Day/Wallingford Events, Communications, and Engagement Task Force.
Contact wallingfordday@gmail.com.

Wednesdays on the Waterfront, Newport: wednesdaysonthewaterfront.com.

Island Pond Chamber of Commerce visitislandpond.com/events-and-festivals and
Brighton Recreation facebook.com/IslandPondAGreatPlaceToLiveAndPlay.

Neshobe Summer Concert Series, Brandon. brandon.org/events-and-happenings.

The Civic Standard, Hardwick State is a community-wide skills exchange model:
thecivicstandard.org/.

Bethel University is a free, community-run pop-up university: betheluniversityvt.org/.

Middlesex created a community operator's manual model which inspired other communities to create similar publications including in Bethel: localwiki.org/wrv/Bethel_Operator%27s_Manual.

Welcoming New Residents to Your Community

Whether you've lived in your town for two years or twenty years, you probably see new faces at the grocery store and town meeting without knowing how or when they arrived. An important part of community leadership is helping newcomers feel rooted from the start. Those who feel welcomed are more likely to participate, volunteer, support local businesses, and develop the same sense of place that long-time residents cherish. A community welcome packet, local mentor, or "welcome wagon" can help new residents understand and navigate local services, traditions, and opportunities to get involved.

ACTION STEPS

1. Gather important information for your town

Walk through your town as if you'd just arrived. Notice what's easy to find and what's confusing. This helps identify landmarks, services, and buildings that should be labeled on a map or highlighted for people unfamiliar with local roads.

Ask neighbors for suggestions you might overlook. People with pets may know about local rabies clinics; parents may know about playgroups; older adults may know about senior meal sites; and newcomers themselves can share what they wished they'd known sooner.

Review existing materials. Look at your town and regional websites, Historic Society pamphlets, recreation guides, school district resources, and local newsletters or calendars for interesting and relevant information.

Check for essential services and logistics. Make sure you've captured basics like emergency contacts, broadband providers, trash and recycling services, transportation options, and how to get onto local mailing lists.

Identify community connection points. Include places where newcomers can meet people – libraries, parks, community centers, faith communities, farmers markets, and volunteer opportunities.

2. Form and build a welcome committee

Decide whether it will operate as a standalone group, a town committee, or as part of a local service organization.

Talk to local service organizations, civic groups, and regional partners to see if they can host the committee or send a representative.

Invite community participation by hosting an informational meeting for residents interested in joining or supporting the welcome committee.

Work with the committee to outline expectations, roles, and time commitments, so members know how to participate and avoid burnout.

Create a newcomer notification process. Establish a simple system – such as a spreadsheet, shared inbox, or short survey – for tracking when the committee becomes aware of new residents.

Provide a clear way for neighbors, town staff, and organizations to notify the committee about newcomers such as a website form or dedicated email address.

Let town staff, libraries, schools, service organizations, and local employers know about the committee and how they can refer newcomers to you.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

3. Create a welcome packet or website

Decide whether you'll create a welcome packet, a welcome webpage, or both. A packet can be as simple as a one-page flyer at the town clerk's office or a town-wide mailing. Templates are available in the resources section below.

Use Google Maps to create a free interactive town map showing stores, restaurants, parks, churches and other landmarks. The town of Fairlee has a nice example here: [google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1POrNYRIC3wVDW_1nni9W0qtfES432bNH&ll=43.89858549090688%2C-72.17058850845945&z=13](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1POrNYRIC3wVDW_1nni9W0qtfES432bNH&ll=43.89858549090688%2C-72.17058850845945&z=13).

Build clear, useful content

Organize your packet or website so the most essential information appears first such as food shelves, libraries, public restrooms, public transportation, social services, and emergency contacts.

Add categories that help newcomers navigate daily life, such as recreation, childcare, schools, broadband providers, waste and recycling schedules, and volunteer opportunities. See the resources section below for examples.

Include a downloadable, easy-to-read map or flyer. Be sure to use standard fonts (Arial or Verdana 12-14 pt) to ensure accessibility.

Review and refine your draft

Have a friend, newcomer, or town clerk review your draft to check:

- Are phone numbers, emails, and addresses correct?
- Is the layout easy to read and printable?
- Does the map or flyer download cleanly?
- Are categories clear and intuitive?
- Is the language welcoming, inclusive, and free of jargon?

Ideas for welcome committee activities

- Host a new resident meet-up at a local park, library, or the town hall.

- Invite local babysitters to run children's activities to make events more accessible for families.
- Create a fact sheet with basic town and regional information, and social opportunities.
- Work with your town to add a "New Residents" page to the town website.
- Keep a list of residents willing to be dinner hosts and match them with newcomers who express interest.
- Partner with the town library to host a book swap or build a little free library together.
- Enlist local teachers to have students create hand drawn maps of the town with their favorite places to include in the packet or website.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

VT Department of Tourism and Marketing encourages welcoming new Vermonters and their Director of Partnerships and Community Engagement specifically supports this work ThinkVermont.com.

Vermont Professionals of Color Network: vtpoc.net/.

Vital Communities: vitalcommunities.org/.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

Think Vermont Grants for Relocation Outreach Work (GROW) Program provides grant funding for local, regional, county-wide, or state-wide organizations to encourage and support new residents relocating to Vermont. The following organizations were awarded grants to help towns promote new resident activities. Reach out to the one that serves your area:

- Addison County Economic Development Corp. addisoncountyedc.org/.
- Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation. brattleborodevelopment.com/.
- Franklin County Industrial Development Corporation. fcidc.com/.
- Green Mountain Economic Development Corp. gmedc.com/.
- Lake Champlain Chamber of Commerce. lccvermont.org/.
- Lamoille Economic Development Corporation. lamoilleeconomy.org/.
- Montpelier Alive. montpelieralive.com/.
- Northeast Kingdom Chamber of Commerce. nekchamber.com/.
- Rutland Economic Development Corporation. rutlandvermont.com/.
- Southwestern Vermont Chamber of Commerce. swvtchamber.com/.

Other Guides, Tools and Resources

The Brattleboro Development Credit Corps offers a number of useful resources:

- Visit the SoVermont.com Welcome Wagon page for links to checklists for welcoming new residents, what to include on a town website, and newcomer's orientation. sovermont.com/newcomers-mixers/.
- A sample town welcome page: sovermont.com/sample/.
- Practical Ways Towns Can Welcome Newcomers: brattleborodevelopment.com/practical-ways-towns-can-welcome-newcomers/.
- BDCC also initiated an "Invite a New Vermonter to Dinner," which was picked up in Addison, Rutland and other towns. sovermont.com/blog/reblog-march-is-invite-a-new-vermonter-to-dinner-month/.

Vermont Welcome Wagon Project: vtwelcomewagon.org/.

Vermont Center for Independent Living: vcil.org.

Vermont Language Justice Project: vtlanguagejustice.org/. Recent projects include food programs and resources (in 16 languages), what to know when looking for housing (in 11 languages) and more: vtlanguagejustice.org/recent-projects.

USCI Office in Vermont: refugees.org/uscir-vermont/.

Examples of Community Welcome Projects Around the State

- Burlington VT: helloburlingtonvt.com/move-to-burlington/living-in-burlington/
- Fairlee VT: fairleevt.gov/fairlee-welcome
- Guilford VT: guilfordvt.gov/available-now-the-guilford-guide/
- Grafton VT graftoncares.org/
- Marlboro VT marlboroalliance.org/component-organizations/cares
- Montpelier VT: montpelierlive.com/capitalconnection
- Rutland VT: realrutland.com/
- Dinner with A New Vermonter: realrutland.com/dinner-with-a-new-vermonter/. Contact Caitlin Gates, Real Rutland Concierge Coordinator at Caitlin@rutlandeconomy.com. Other towns
- Addison County VT: addisoncounty.com/imagine.

Increasing Civic Engagement and Municipal Capacity

Local leaders are the heart and soul of Vermont communities. Volunteers and paid staff alike provide not only basic services but the fabric of community life. Many communities are thinking about how to recruit, coordinate and support people to help run their towns, their schools, emergency services, libraries and to meet other community needs.

ACTION STEPS

1. Create an Engagement Team

Identify community members or groups who are most interested in promoting engagement, and recruit a leadership team. Some may be the busiest people in town, so emphasize that your goal is ultimately to increase community support for their efforts. School and youth groups, senior centers, and worship organizations are just a few other groups that can help connect volunteers with community needs.

As you build your team, consider intentionally reaching out to people who have historically been left out of decision-making or volunteer roles, including renters, young adults, new residents, BIPOC community members, people with disabilities, and those with limited free time. Partner with trusted messengers and community connectors to ensure invitations reach beyond the “usual volunteers.”

If possible, convene participants for a kick-off meeting (or for a soft launch, start with a series of coffee conversations, calls, or a survey). Together, work to identify common goals and the top engagement priorities.

Identify a point person to convene stakeholders (staff, board members, supporters, people who benefit from your services) to talk about what volunteer roles are needed and what tasks would be appropriate. This group can ensure that there are opportunities that require varying levels of training and commitment to allow volunteers to opt in at the most appropriate “rung.”

Civic participation is often described as a “ladder”: This means it’s important for communities to provide “bottom rung” activities that help people enter into public life, then build clear steps to higher levels of participation as interests and skills grow. Ideally, each rung on the engagement ladder offers its own rewarding civic experience.

Here are some questions for the group to consider: What assets does your team want to build on, such as existing volunteer programs, or leaders who have proven mentoring skills to share? And what opportunities are especially ripe in your community right now—community topics that consistently draw interest, needs or priorities that everyone agrees need attention? Think creatively about how community members with a variety of skills could be matched with volunteer tasks large and small, in service to your common goal.

2. Communicate and Recruit

Humans are naturally social beings, but our attention today is at a premium. Even if they'd like to help, not everyone knows how to get involved, so illuminate the first steps creatively.

Start simple: identify "micro-volunteering" opportunities—1-2 hour tasks like bringing snacks, entering data, or staffing an event table. For longer volunteer jobs, give clear start and end dates. Include remote volunteer options (research, graphic design). Target specific skills so people can see themselves in the role. Include opportunities for people of all ages and abilities.

Describe the opportunities clearly and make sure your website has a list of ongoing volunteer opportunities and contact information for those interested in getting involved. Post committees' formation document and describe their work and meeting schedules, and any requisite statutory components, as well as specific activities to spark interest. For instance, "The Trails Committee regularly hosts work afternoons to clear pathways. Bring your loppers—no special skills needed, snacks provided, and families welcome."

When recruiting, consider how you could include stipends, childcare support, transportation reimbursement, or meals when possible. Even small supports can remove barriers for people who want to participate but cannot afford unpaid time.

Consider offering volunteer descriptions in multiple languages, plain-language formats, and audio or video formats to ensure accessibility.

Reach out to specialized groups (e.g. gardening clubs, historical groups, youth teams) and match your request to their particular skills and energy level. Leverage existing support by asking current volunteers to bring a friend or encourage involvement from their networks.

Host a volunteer fair or "social hour" (online or in person) where leaders highlight their group's priorities and volunteer opportunities. Set up a table at community events to advertise volunteer opportunities. Use Front Porch Forum and social media to spread the word. Post QR codes in popular areas (library, general store) that link to a volunteer sign-up page. For more ideas, see "Inviting the Public: Practical Tips."

3. Offer strong volunteer support and training opportunities

Respect your volunteers' time and offer them opportunities to grow.

For any volunteer position, make sure you begin by offering an orientation—how does this work fit into the greater goals of the community? Then, provide clear instructions for the needed task. If this is a regular or recurring position (e.g. poll worker, annual plant fair) consider creating a welcome packet or video explaining the job. Create materials in multiple, accessible formats.

Pair new volunteers with an experienced mentor who has served in this role and can answer questions.

For longer-term volunteer slots, such as board positions, encourage participation in courses and workshops. Encourage volunteers to bring back fresh ideas and apply their

new knowledge creatively. Consider creating tiers of volunteering, so that seasoned volunteers can sense advancement by becoming a committee officer or serving on an advisory committee.

Examine your policies regarding stipends for volunteer positions and consider whether they are welcoming to potential participants from all backgrounds. At a minimum, try to offer stipends for travel, childcare, or other needs.

Check in with volunteers, whether through a post-event survey, or annual check-ins for long-term positions, to see if there are ways you can improve these experiences.

4. Celebrate success and local leadership

Our communities run on neighborly commitment. Celebrating these contributions is not only a way to say thank you, but a way to inspire others to step up. There are many ways to express appreciation, such as:

- Publicly share the service of volunteers and local leaders. Dedicate the town report or organization's annual report for a special achievement. Tell their story on Front Porch Forum, post a film clip on social media, create a "wall of fame" in your town office, a local business or other public space.
- Host community events to provide an opportunity for volunteers to relax together. Invite friends, family, and neighbors, and consider creating certificates or thank-you gifts.
- Invite standout volunteers to take the next step, such as speak on behalf of an issue at a public meeting, attend an enrichment training, or join an advisory board. If appropriate, offer letters of recommendation or networking endorsements.
- Offer spontaneous appreciation. Leaders can telephone, send a surprise text, or send a handwritten card naming a specific impact a volunteer has had.

5. Build Municipal Capacity

In addition to strengthening community-wide volunteerism and civic engagement, it may be time to consider whether your municipal structures are meeting your community's needs. Methods to increase municipal capacity include:

- Increase the size of the selectboard. Vermont law requires selectboards to have at least three members, but towns can vote to increase the board to five or more. Towns can explore the relative merits of each size as it affects efficiency, representation, workload, and more, and determine the best size for your current needs.
- Increase the number, or adjust hours, of paid staff. As municipal responsibilities expand, many Vermont towns are realizing they need to expand beyond their past staff configurations. This may involve adding hours to existing staff positions, or adding positions such as a selectboard assistant, town administrator, or (in larger communities) town manager. Careful consideration and monitoring of town office needs will help improve efficiency and reduce the likelihood of both staff and volunteer burnout.

- Increase the size or job description of existing boards or commissions. For instance, your selectboard may want to expand the scope of the Conservation Commission to serve as a land trust, or include a trails committee.
- Consider shared services. It is possible for municipalities to share a variety of services with neighboring communities, ranging from informal agreements to share equipment, to formal, long-term inter-municipal contracts.
- Conduct succession planning. Rather than a sudden crisis, filling board positions can be an ongoing “talent search.” Boards can keep track of which positions are likely to open up, and scout potential members—professionals, young leaders, retirees—whose interests and skills match upcoming needs. Inviting participation on task forces or subcommittees first can build institutional knowledge, and help build a healthy community leadership pipeline. Check to see which positions require town residency and which don’t, so you can cast a wider net if allowed.
- Create a temporary task force on a specific project. A short-term task force can solve a particular problem, while also being the right match for some volunteers. Once it’s completed, this success can also lead to further involvement. See “Fostering Strong Municipal-Community Partnerships,”
- Municipalities may also consider offering stipends for board or committee service, especially for roles requiring significant time or expertise. Even small stipends can help diversify participation and reduce barriers for working families, caregivers, and low-income residents.
 - Montpelier: The city implemented a Boards & Committees Stipend Program to provide \$50 per meeting, specifically targeting barriers like lost wages, childcare, and transportation for its committee volunteers. montpelier-vt.org.
 - Hartford: The Selectboard adopted a Stipend Policy compensating appointed committee, commission, and board members at \$50 per meeting for up to two meetings per month: hartford-vt.org/.
 - Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) created an Interim Volunteer Stipend Policy to offer \$50 per meeting to eligible volunteers participating in advisory committees: ccrpcvt.org/.

To implement a similar program in your own town, your local Selectboard or Town Council must typically warn and pass a policy in conjunction with the voter-approved annual town budget.

Note: In Vermont, these stipends are considered reportable income, and participating volunteers must generally submit an IRS W-9 form to receive payment.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Common Good Vermont works to support Vermont’s non-profit sector, offering resources, training, and networking opportunities for non-profits. commongoodvt.org

Vermont League of Cities and Towns (vlct.org) serves Vermont local governments, and offers a variety of resources and training to its members. Related resources include:

- Changing the Size of Your Selectboard.
- Town Manager or Administrator: Organizational Structures Guide.
- “Hiring Your First Town Administrator or Selectboard Administrative Assistant.”

Vermont Secretary of State – Elections Division The Elections Division provides training, manuals, and guidance for election workers, board members, and municipal officials. Their resources include the *Election Procedures Guide*, accessibility guidance, and compliance tools for running local elections. sos.vermont.gov/elections.

Vermont Secretary of State – Civics & Civic Engagement (Civic Connect) Civic Connect offers nonpartisan civic engagement tools, outreach materials, and support for organizations seeking to strengthen community participation. They provide templates, educational materials, and guidance for public-facing civic information. sos.vermont.gov/civics.

Vermont Secretary of State – Municipal Officer Guides The SOS publishes manuals for town clerks, treasurers, auditors, listers, and justices of the peace. These guides are essential for onboarding new volunteers and strengthening municipal capacity. sos.vermont.gov/municipal.

Vermont Division for Historic Preservation - If your engagement or municipal capacity project involves historic buildings or public spaces, the Division for Historic Preservation can provide guidance on rehabilitation, preservation standards, and available financial incentives. acd.vermont.gov/historic-preservation.

Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) across Vermont offer technical assistance for municipal planning, community engagement, bylaw modernization, shared services exploration, and project development. They can help towns build capacity and navigate complex municipal processes. Find your RPC at vapda.org/

UVM Extension – Community Development & Leadership Programs offers facilitation training, youth engagement programs, and community development support. They can assist with leadership pipelines, volunteer training, and community engagement design. uvm.edu/extension.

Vermont Humanities supports community dialogue, storytelling events, and civic learning programs. They can help towns host inclusive conversations, public forums, and cultural engagement activities. vermonthumanities.org.

Vermont Arts Council The Arts Council provides grants and technical assistance for community-based arts engagement, public art projects, and creative placemaking — all of which can strengthen civic identity and volunteer participation. vermontartscouncil.org.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscric-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

Vermont Community Foundation - VCF offers grant programs that support civic engagement, community leadership, equity initiatives, and municipal capacity projects. vermontcf.org.

Vermont Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD) DHCD administers Municipal Planning Grants, Bylaw Modernization Grants, and other programs that support community engagement, planning, and municipal capacity building. accd.vermont.gov/community-development.

Vermont Department of Buildings & General Services – Building Communities Grants. This program funds community facility improvements, including town halls, libraries, and public spaces that support civic engagement. bgs.vermont.gov/commissioner/building-communities-grants.

USDA Rural Development – Community Facilities Programs USDA RD offers grants and loans for municipal buildings, emergency services, community centers, and other infrastructure that supports civic participation. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

Vermont Humanities – Community Project Grants Supports public engagement events, community conversations, and civic learning programs. vermonthumanities.org/grants.

Vermont Arts Council – Animating Infrastructure & Community Grants Funds creative placemaking and public art projects that strengthen community identity and volunteer engagement. vermontartscouncil.org/grants.

Vermont Housing & Conservation Board – REDI Program The Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) provides funding for towns and nonprofits to hire grant writers and technical experts to advance community and economic development projects. vhcb.org/redi.

Youth, Families and Wellbeing



Engaging Youth: A Key to Community Vitality

To build lasting communities, youth voices must be at the foundation. “Youth” covers a wide age range from pre-teen to early 20s—this is when people begin to connect with their community, recognize themselves as valued members of society, and discover the topics they’re most passionate about. Vermont’s aging demographic has made us one of the oldest states in the nation, creating struggles with school closures, shrinking rural economies and workforces, and volunteer burnout. Some young people feel they don’t belong, moving away as soon as they reach independence. How can rural communities retain the vitality of young families, workers, and eager volunteers, and make sure young people are part of shaping our future?

ACTION STEPS

1. Invite youth to the table early.

As with all community projects, don’t wait until a plan is finished to ask for feedback. If you’re ready to talk to anyone, you’re ready to talk to youth. When adults and youth co-design a project, the results are more creative, durable, and effective.

- Sit down with a few local young people. Explain your project and ask: “What do you think? What elements of this project sound most interesting to people your age? Can you imagine ways young people might engage with this project?” Explore their ideas both on how to connect with other youth, and on the initiative overall.
- Speak with youth of different ages, backgrounds, and interests. Each will see your project through a different lens, and may come up with questions or ideas you hadn’t thought of.
- Not sure how to connect with young people? Try reaching out to the local parent-community group, sports and activity providers, homeschooling network, school guidance counselors, or asking a teacher of late-elementary ages or older to speak to their class for feedback.

2. Address the power dynamics.

Recognizing power dynamics can help turn an uncomfortable situation into a positive one,—and help your project succeed. If you’re an adult, think back to the first time you joined a public meeting. Were you nervous? Or if you’re a young person, can you think of a time when you were new to a group and they didn’t take your idea seriously? These scenarios happen when someone has less power or influence in a group than others.

Tips on power dynamics:

- In most decision making, adults hold the expertise and history. While this is important, these elements can drive the conversation, sometimes making youth feel

like intruders rather than contributors. Remind adults that focusing on “how things have always worked” might be keeping new ideas and perspectives out.

- Youth involvement sometimes is seen as an add-on or a side-project, which detracts from its credibility and long-term impact. Ensure your process not only allows youth to speak, but actively clears a path for them to lead. Create active, structural mechanisms to involve youth throughout.
- Avoid relying on just a couple of young people. Singling someone out as a “spokesperson” assumes that all young people want the same things and can create undue pressure.
- Use facilitation tools that level the playing field. See suggested tools below. Also see “Dealing with Disagreement,” “Facilitating Demanding Moments,” and “Including Diverse Leadership and Participation in Community Processes.”

3. Compensate youth for their expertise.

Youth are busy. Between school, jobs, and family, their time is a limited resource. Be transparent, offer to compensate them up front when you first reach out, and make the process easy.

- Offer Pay: If the project budget allows, provide a stipend or hourly rate. This justifies the time they might otherwise spend at a part-time job.
- Offer Credit: If money isn’t available, work with local schools to offer academic or community service credits. Working with the school is also a good way to help make the schedule for engaging youth more flexible; students may be able to call into a remote meeting during the school day or an entire class may be able to engage with the project at once.
- Offer recognition: High school students may be looking for experiences to strengthen their job resumes or college applications, so be generous with letters of support.

4. Make engagement easy.

With young people helping to shape the process from the beginning, your process is more likely to use accessible, youth-friendly language, work with young people’s schedules, and sound appealing to all ages. Try out the following:

- Choose locations that are familiar and accessible to youth.
- Take school schedules or other obligations into consideration.
- Remove transportation barriers by offering gas cards or bus passes, or hybrid options.
- Invite multiple youth together so they can lean on peers in this new experience.
- Include adults such as teachers, librarians, and parents who are trusted, skilled bridges between youth and adults.
- Build in plenty of time for questions.

- Ask younger participants how they like to communicate and participate. Adopt a variety of communication and participation styles (visual, hands-on, digital polls, or small-group chats).

5. Go to youth spaces.

Don't always expect youth to come to adult spaces. By holding meetings in places where young people are the majority (after-school activities, skate parks or rec fields, or classes), you shift the "home-field advantage" and allow them to speak more freely. Plus, youth were probably already going to be there.

6. Celebrate collaborations.

Focus on the benefits of combining wisdom and experience with youthful energy and fresh ideas. Ask adults to think of a time when someone supported their suggestion, offered mentorship, or opened a door for their ideas. Boosting the ideas of others not only results in creative solutions, it can be a joyful experience for all involved.

7. Bring youth voices to the center.

The goal isn't just to have a youth meeting on the side. It is to incorporate young people wherever decisions are made. Consistently and meaningfully center youth voices. Here are some ideas to do so:

Group structures to engage youth:

- If you have a group (formal or informal) of advisors, does it reflect the make-up of the community? Consider having one third of the advisory slots filled by youth.
- For any brainstorming phase of a project, go to a youth space (classroom, afterschool program, community center) and do the same exercises with that group that you are planning to do in a community setting.
- Invite young people personally (and keep their adult caregivers informed) for community events. Keep the tone of dialogue welcoming and appreciative.
- Invite young people to co-facilitate or co-lead projects with adults. As with any collaborative leadership, find out what each person is strongest at or most comfortable with doing, what they have time to do, and what aspects of leading they would most like support on.

Facilitation techniques for youth engagement:

- Start by adopting group ground rules (see "Dealing with Disagreement"). Rules that can help elevate youth voices include: Keep comments brief (appoint a timekeeper if you need to enforce this); and no one speaks a second time until everyone else in the room has had a chance.
- In a group discussion, if youth Jamie and Sam haven't spoken yet, the facilitator might say, "I haven't heard from Devon, Jamie, Sam or Alicia yet... What are your thoughts on this?" This way they know their voice is valued, but they aren't completely put on the spot.

- If judgments like, “we’ve already tried that” are creeping in, the facilitator can say, “let’s hear some new ideas or contrasting opinions, and then as a group highlight what we can learn from those ideas.” For additional facilitation suggestions, see “Managing Effective Meetings” and “Facilitating in Demanding Moments.”

Process tools to elevate youth voices:

- Include movement. Put a few prompts on flip charts, and have everyone move around the room writing down their response. Circle around a second time to see other’s responses. Physical motion energizes discussions and prompts fresh thinking for all.
- Incorporate creativity and productive play. Groups of every age benefit from interactive exercises to build understanding and generate new ideas. For instance, offer a storytelling prompt, such as to describe a childhood memory of the place or topic your group is addressing; this allows a range of perspectives to emerge. Create a large informal map and ask everyone to place post-its marking their favorite places to walk, meet, play, or spots that are meaningful to them.
- Vary group sizes. Have people pair off and speak for a few minutes each. Build on this by having them do a listening exercise to capture what their partner said, or by having them identify shared perspectives, or even by having them then pair into groups of four and continue to find common ground. These quick methods ensure everyone gets a chance to speak, process in different ways, and find commonality with others.
- Allow anonymity. For challenging topics, try a salad bowl exercise where people have a couple of minutes to write a response to your prompt. Everyone folds up their response, puts their message in a bowl, and then everyone takes a different message out and reads it out loud to the group.

Inclusive decision-making:

- If you need to know how everyone in the room feels about a decision you can do “temperature check” with a thumbs up, sideways or down; or a finger scale from one to five. You can also give people 3 different colored paper squares for different responses.
- If you need to make a decision and want everyone to have equal say, you can post the options and give everyone an equal number of dot stickers which they can use to vote something up or down.

Youth facilitation:

- Youth leadership helps prevent other young people from being unsure and simply going along with the rest of the group, or speaking toward the end when people’s attention has drifted. For any of these exercises (and the hundreds of others that you can find through a facilitation training, in a library for facilitation tools, or online) you can enlist young people as facilitators or co-facilitators.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Vermont Afterschool helps communities establish local youth councils, provides guidance on youth participation and advocacy, and has developed a Youth Voice Community of Practice for people interested in youth decision-making, youth leadership, and youth councils. Its Vermont Youth Project (VYP) provides community-level support for building positive youth development and youth engagement. VYP has supported 8–10 local youth councils across Vermont and has provided funding for youth stipends and youth-driven projects. vermontafterschool.org/youthvoice.

Vermont State Youth Council - created by state law, the Council is made up of youth from across the state's counties and advises the Governor and General Assembly on issues affecting young people. Communities could look to the Council's structure, recommendations, and approach as a model for developing their own youth advisory groups. legislature.vermont.gov/.

UP for Learning works with Vermont schools and communities to build youth-adult partnerships and youth leadership. Its Getting to 'Y' program uses youth-led participatory action research, adult partnerships, and community engagement to help young people analyze data and lead change in their schools. This is a useful model for research, analysis, decision-making, and implementation. upforlearning.org/initiatives/getting-to-y/.

University of Vermont Extension 4-H offers youth leadership, community service, and experiential learning opportunities throughout Vermont. Local 4-H programs can be partners for community projects looking to involve youth in hands-on leadership and service. uvm.edu/extension/youth/teen-and-leadership-programs

Vermont Rural Education Collaborative (VREC) can be a useful partner when youth engagement is connected to schools, place-based learning, service learning, or community projects. Its mini-grants require student leadership and community partnership and support projects such as community gardens, food shelf initiatives, senior meals, and other community-based projects. vtruraledu.org/mini-grants.

Local schools and school districts are important partners. Work directly with schools to integrate your project into the curriculum so that students can receive academic credit, service-learning credit, or other recognition for community projects. Talk about this with leadership but also with teachers, school counselors, librarians, afterschool staff, student government advisors, and career and technical education programs.

Local youth-serving organizations and youth centers can provide trusted spaces for engagement outside the school system. For ideas see Vermont Afterschool's Vermont Youth Center Alliance, vermontafterschool.org/vyca/ or reach out to your region's Vermont Prevention Lead Organizations who work with many different local youth programs in their area, see healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drugs/programs-services/community-prevention-programs.

HOBV Vermont provides leadership development for high school students, and may be a useful partner for communities looking to connect with young people already interested in civic and community leadership. hobyvt.org/.

Vermont's Kid Governor is a newer civic education resource led by the Vermont Secretary of State's Office for students to learn about state government, voting, civic participation, and community action through an authentic statewide election and related classroom activities. vt.kidgovernor.org.

Vermont Youth Development Program provides another example of meaningful youth-adult partnership through its Youth Advisory Board and youth-led advocacy work which demonstrates how organizations can work with, support, and compensate young people in organizational decision-making and how to educate adults. vtyouthdevelopmentprogram.org.

Funding

Vermont Youth Project provides stipends for participating youth as well as funds for youth-designed projects. Communities interested in youth engagement should ask about current opportunities and whether their community can participate in VYP. vermontafterschool.org/vyp.

Vermont Rural Education Collaborative Mini-Grants offer small-scale funding that can directly support youth-led community projects. Student-Led, Place-Based Learning Grants provide up to \$1,500 and emphasize student voice in developing and pitching projects. vtruraledu.org/mini-grants.

Vermont Community Foundation offers a range of place-based and community grants that may support youth engagement depending on the project and geography, such as their Spark Connecting Community grants, or their regionally or issue-based targeted funds. vermontcf.org/.

Vermont Children's Trust Fund supports organizations working to strengthen children and families. Its grants have supported youth leadership, mentoring, community engagement, and related programs, making it worth monitoring for organizations whose youth engagement work is connected to prevention, family support, or healthy development. Recent funded projects include youth-led social justice programming and peer mentoring. vtchildrenstrust.org.

Guides and Other Resources

Vermont Afterschool's Vermont Youth Project Community Lead Toolkit provides practical guidance for communities on youth voice, youth councils, welcoming spaces, youth-led initiatives, and creating meaningful roles for young people on local boards and coalitions. vermontafterschool.org/vyp.

UP For Learning's has a resource center including podcasts, videos and papers about youth leadership and youth-adult partnership. upforlearning.org/resource-center/.

The Vermont State Youth Council's recommendations can serve as a useful example of what meaningful youth policy engagement can produce. vtstateyouthcouncil.org/recommendations.

Local youth councils:

- Bennington Youth Council. actbennington.org/.
- Cabot Youth Council through Cabot Community Association. cabotvermont.org/about/.
- Brattleboro Area Youth Council. bapc802.org/brattleboro-area-youth-council/.
- VT Youth Program has helped Barre, Bennington, Cabot, Rutland County, and Franklin County communities establish local youth councils. Reach out to staff at VT Afterschool to get connected. vermontafterschool.org.
- The Youth Advocacy Council is a leadership and advocacy group facilitated with support from HireAbility Vermont for young people with disabilities. hireabilityvt.com/youth/youth-advocacy-council/.
- The Youth Advisory Board is a group of youth and adult supporters advocating for an improved foster care system, building skills for youth, and elevating youth voices. vtyouthdevelopmentprogram.org/youth-advisory-board-yab.



Build a School and Community Partnership

When parents and local residents feel invested in the schools, and schools are strongly connected to the community, kids learn better. Meanwhile, community members benefit from all of the social and economic advantages that arise from a thriving, successful school and community center.

ACTION STEPS

1. Build the partnership.

Build a list of potentially interested participants, thinking as inclusively as possible about who would care about strengthening a school-community relationship. Think about students, parents, teachers, local business leaders, organization heads, community groups, civic and social clubs. If you broaden the invitation to any community member who cares, you might be pleasantly surprised by the energy and volunteerism that emerges from the community (see “Inviting the Public”).

Convene a meeting to frame the purpose and direction for the partnership.

Together, build a clearly articulated set of goals. What do you hope to accomplish? What might you achieve, both in the short term and longer term, by coming together? Identify outcomes that all partners can agree to. (See “Setting Priorities for Action”).

Formalize a structure to stay connected. You may wish to create a board with representatives from each institution, plus ad hoc members to represent unaffiliated sectors such as parents or taxpayers.

Develop a communications plan. How are you going to communicate internally among partners? How are you going to continue to communicate with the larger community and solicit participation in your efforts?

2. Inventory local educational assets, skills, and needs.

Assets: Build a list of successful educational assets in your community.

- Identify existing educational programs and collaborations. Evaluate their impact on participants, level of outreach to the broader community, and financial sustainability.
- Who benefits from current programs?
- Who supports them?

Skills: Inventory the skills in your community. This inventory can be used for multiple purposes, including the development of a talent pool, and for later matching potential mentees or apprentices to local experts.

- Build a list of businesses and organizations in the community that could offer training or educationally enriching experiences.

- Think creatively. Keep in mind the skills and talents of individuals, including farmers, self-employed people, entrepreneurs, outdoorspeople, hobbyists, and others.
- Identify particular areas of expertise among local teachers or professors that could be valuable to the community.

Needs and Opportunities: Identify areas where coordination is currently lacking or there is an opportunity for more connection. This is the time to think creatively about all the ways the school and community might come together. Consider apprenticeships, mentor programs, community service, sporting events, integrating municipal issues into local curricula, and internships. More ideas are outlined below.

3. Expand school-community programming.

Work with your list of partners and talent inventory to implement your creative program ideas. Following the lead of other Vermont communities, you might create collaborations to:

- Develop a local mentorship or apprenticeship program.
 - Mentorships and apprenticeships connect students to community and business leaders. Students' varied interests can spur new engagement from the community.
 - Not only can mentorships and apprenticeships improve students' educational outcomes, they can improve professional and social outcomes for all parties.
 - The key to successful mentorships is to have well-articulated protocols and safety guidelines. Developing these could be the undertaking of a local committee; or connect with statewide educational providers and professionals for assistance in drafting guideline language.
- Increase incentives for internships and service-learning by developing longer-term opportunities or positions with local businesses and organizations.
- Allowing high school juniors and seniors to acquire academic credit for part-time work, for example, can offer hands-on learning while developing a pipeline of skilled employees for local employers.
- Host a school-business symposium. This could provide an opportunity for community dialogue. Discussion themes could include:
 - Preparing students for the working world
 - Identifying local workforce needs
 - Making the most of mentorships and apprenticeships
 - Sharing inspiring business and vocation stories
- Convene a series of school-community forums on locally prioritized topics of interest. Topics might include farm-to-school initiatives, healthy communities, substance abuse, diversity and equity issues, homeschool/school partnerships, standardized testing, and civic participation.
- Integrate school events and activities into a broader community calendar, in order to help to increase community participation.
- Make school playgrounds and recreational facilities available to the broader community during non-school hours. This can go a long way towards fostering

community good will. Consider coordinating an open gym, ice rink, playground, or ball field hours.

Connect with a nearby college if possible. Nearly every idea described above for a school partnership could be done with a college or university. If your town does have a local college, there are even more opportunities for mentorship and tutoring of local high school students by college students.

Consider seeking outside funding sources and philanthropy, particularly to help support pilot initiatives. For more information on potential state and local funding sources, see “Resources” section below.

4. Communicate, celebrate, and reflect.

Continually keep the community informed about all this good work. Use a variety of communications channels from traditional media to local community listservs, the town and school webpages, and social media. (See “Communicating with the Community”).

Tell positive stories of successful partnerships. Promoting community service projects and opportunities will not only encourage student participation and increase community volunteers, but also remind people of the value of community collaboration, support, and service and build local morale. Many residents may simply not know the breadth of the opportunities available, and heightened awareness may directly lead to increased program participation.

Your efforts are part of a continuing community story, so be sure to mention past work that you have built on. This will help strengthen community understanding and sense of ownership.

Take time periodically to reflect on the programs and the narrative you’re building. What’s working? What’s not? Have the needs of the community changed? Use the team you have built to evaluate and improve on your efforts.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

The Vermont Agency of Education can be a resource. The Secretary could be invited to come to town and be a part of fostering this partnership and improving opportunity for students. education.vermont.gov.

Mentor Vermont is Vermont’s state-wide mentoring organization. This group is a valuable resource and they may also have funding to support mentoring activities. mentorvt.org/.

UP for Learning is a useful resource to help bring young people and adults together as partners to design and implement initiatives. upforlearning.com.

Vermont Afterschool, Inc. can help with afterschool programming and other youth enrichment programs. vermontafterschool.org.

Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) could be a helpful partner in finding funding for conservation project jobs in the community and could be a resource in thinking about ways to engage youth in the community. vycc.org.

UVM Extension provides programming to help connect youth to their communities and communities to youth. uvm.edu/extension.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

Vermont Community Foundation can be a funding partner to help connect the community and address the opportunity gap in Vermont. vermontcf.org.

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. Cause IQ maintains a directory of Vermont-based grantmaking foundations. causeiq.com/directory/foundations-list/vermont-state/.



Engaging with Anchor Institutions in Your Community

Hospitals, colleges and universities, major employers, and other anchor institutions are vital parts of Vermont communities. They bring people, ideas, facilities, and investment into communities which can offer them a sense of place, partnership, and long-term stability.

Groups often come together to engage anchor institutions either because a pressing issue has emerged or because community members recognize the value of building relationships before challenges arise. Sometimes a proposed change—like a hospital adjusting services or a college planning new development—creates urgency and motivates people to organize. Other times, communities form groups proactively to explore shared opportunities, strengthen communication, or align long-term planning. In practice, many groups begin reactively and evolve into proactive partners as trust grows. What matters most is the commitment to sustained collaboration, so towns and anchor institutions can navigate challenges and pursue opportunities together.

Strong relationships and trust between towns and anchor institutions take time to build, but when done well, they create mutual benefit in good times and bad. This chapter outlines practical steps for developing and sustaining these partnerships.

ACTION STEPS

1. Gather Interested People to Create a Partnership Group

Start by bringing together residents, institutional representatives, business owners, municipal staff, students, and local leaders who care about strengthening the town / institution relationship to build a shared space for collaboration.

Recruit Partnership Group members who reflect the diversity of both the town and the institution, and bring a mix of perspectives and lived experiences. This includes:

- **Local Government & Civic Leadership:** municipal staff, selectboard or city council members, planning commission members, emergency services (fire, EMS, police), regional planning commission representatives
- **Community Residents & Local Organizations:** long-time residents and newcomers, faith communities and churches, senior center staff and older adult advocates, library staff, food shelf or social service organizations, local Rotary, Lions Club, or other civic groups, mutual aid networks or volunteer coordinators
- **Business & Workforce Partners:** Local employers, small business owners, Chamber of Commerce or business association representatives, frontline staff from major employers, workforce development or career center staff

- Education & Anchor Institution Representatives: school district staff, teachers and faculty, students (K–12 and higher ed), student government and student organizations, alumni networks, staff from the anchor institution
- Other representatives: healthcare providers (especially if the anchor is a hospital or clinic), transportation providers, housing organizations, youth organizations, people with lived experience of local challenges

Early tasks for the group could include:

- Identifying shared goals
- Understanding each other's priorities
- Building trust and communication habits
- Establishing a sense of shared ownership
- Developing a catchy and accessible name for your group

The group should also commit to ongoing outreach beyond its core membership through listening sessions, working groups, or targeted outreach.

2. Identify and Map Assets

Begin by mapping the full range of assets across both the institution and the community such as:

Institutional assets:

- Academic departments
- Workforce and career offices
- Programs open to the public
- Sports and recreation staff, programs and facilities
- Student groups
- Research centers
- Facilities and event spaces
- Leadership champions

Community assets:

- Employers and small businesses
- Nonprofits and civic groups
- Municipal departments
- Schools and libraries
- Recreation assets
- Trusted community leaders

3. Secure Clear Buy-In and Support from Institutional Leadership and the Community

Strong partnerships depend on visible, explicit support from leadership on both sides. Look for commitments such as:

- Public endorsement of the partnership
- Designated staff time to participate
- Clear communication channels
- Authorization to engage in shared decision-making

Leadership buy-in gives the Partnership Group legitimacy and resilience, especially during staff turnover or institutional change. A simple Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) can help formalize this support by outlining the partnership's purpose, roles, expectations, time commitments, decision-making authority, and how information flows back to each institution.

4. Create a Clear Public Communications Plan

A simple, intentional communications plan helps the broader community understand the partnership's work. In addition to ongoing outreach through listening sessions or working groups, consider:

- Regular updates in newsletters, local media, and campus channels
- A shared community calendar
- Social media posts
- Public meetings or open houses

Limit the Initial Focus and Set a Timeline:

- Resist the urge to tackle everything at once. Identify 2-3 priority focus areas that are timely, achievable, and meaningful to both the community and the institution. Examples include:
 - Community engagement
 - Shared recreation or arts programming
 - Workforce pathways
 - Housing
 - Transportation

Set a clear timeline with milestones and early wins. Early success builds momentum and trust.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

The Vermont Council on Rural Development can offer guidance and referrals to additional resources: <http://vtrural.org>.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

AARP has grants and toolkits to point communities in the right direction to get started. aarp.org/vermont.

Local businesses and community banks might provide sponsorships and in-kind support.

Local Rotary Club or other civic group might provide community project funding.

Vermont Community Foundation: Spark, Regional & Local Impact, and Arts & Social Cohesion grants: vermontcf.org/for-nonprofits/funds-and-programs/.

Vermont Arts Council Animating Infrastructure Grants: vermontartscouncil.org/.

Ben & Jerry's Foundation: Community Action Grants benandjerrysfoundation.org/vermont-grants/community-action-team/.

Vermont League of Cities and Towns can provide resources for communities working with universities and other institutions: vlct.org/.

Your local Regional Development Corporation (RDC) and/or Regional Planning Commission (RPC) can offer technical support and connect you with professionals and experts in your area. Find your RDC here: accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/resources/rdc, and your RPC here: vapda.org/.

Examples of Successful Community Projects

Northfield–Norwich University Task Force (formed in 2023)
vtrural.org/northfield-report-and-action-plan-july-2023/.

Burlington Office of Student and Community Relations (UVM): uvm.edu/oscr

Johnson / Vermont State University Partnership Group: vtrural.org/re-imagine-johnson-february-2025/



Address Childcare Needs in Your Community

Access to high-quality, affordable childcare is one of the fundamental economic and workforce development issues facing Vermont. There is hardly a community in the state where families don't face significant barriers in this arena, and it is an issue that can affect the whole community. However, there are steps that communities can take to increase access to quality child care and support child care providers. Here are some steps that communities have found helpful to address this critical need.

ACTION STEPS

1. Gather a team to research local child care needs and opportunities.

Assemble a diverse team of community members interested in the issue of childcare. Inviting a broad range of participation now will help inform your efforts. Parents and educators are likely to be interested, and invite representatives of employers, service providers, and others. (See "Inviting the Public").

Conduct a community childcare asset and needs assessment. For many communities the biggest problem is a lack of sufficient childcare; however, a number of other childcare challenges may be present. Asking these and other questions can help you understand the needs and opportunities specific to your community:

- Review the most recent child care supply/demand gap analysis found at firstchildrensfinance.org/vermont/
- Is childcare available at the times families need it (e.g. for 2nd and 3rd shift workers)?
- Is it easy to find information on what childcare is available locally?
- Is existing childcare affordable for all?
- In addition to affordability, are there other barriers to finding childcare? For key considerations, see "Including Diverse Leadership and Participation in Community Processes."
- Where is childcare working effectively, and what makes it work?

Gather feedback on these questions from a wide variety of community members and groups, including families, early childhood educators, employers, local school representatives, and others. Try different forms of outreach, including:

- Surveys (use both online and printed)
- Community convenings and focus groups
- One-on-one interviews
- For more tips on community outreach, see "Communicating with the Community."

For templates to follow in conducting your assessment and more information on Vermont's early care and education system see "Resources" below.

2. Analyze the data.

What did you learn from the assessment? Consider the following questions as you identify your community's assets, needs, and opportunities:

- What are the childcare needs in your community specific to families? To providers? To employers?
- Who (what demographic or sub-group) has the most need?
- What resources are available to help address these needs? (Such as existing businesses or providers, buildings that might be a good fit for expanding childcare, as well as local or state funding, see the Resources section below.)
- Where is childcare working well, and what can you build on or learn from these models?
- Where (what part of the community, surrounding towns, region) are there needs? Where are childcare needs being fulfilled?
- Are local childcare needs driven primarily by residents, commuters to town, or both?
- How are the needs and assets you've observed likely to change over time? How will systems set up today be equipped to handle the demands of five or ten years from now?

3. Identify potential action steps.

Based on your analysis, what will be the most effective steps to close the gaps and lower barriers to accessing childcare in your community? In most cases there is no single solution, and it will likely take a combination of several different tactics to improve local childcare. To analyze your options, your group may wish to do a version of the process described in "Setting Priorities for Action."

At this stage, it can be helpful to reach out to regional and state partners for help, who can share a wealth of experience implementing childcare solutions. Some action steps that have proven successful in Vermont communities include:

- Providing information on family-friendly policies and programs to local employers, including how to support employees' childcare needs.
- Use the municipal website and other digital or physical bulletins to provide information on childcare and early learning in Vermont. Materials could cover how to find local childcare options, Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program, and the region's community childcare support agency.
- Partnering with your municipality, state childcare advocates, resource providers, and/or local philanthropy to establish any of the following programs:
 - In-kind or capital support for existing regulated childcare providers to expand their capacity and strengthen the quality of their programming.

- A community childcare scholarship program to supplement the state's Child Care Financial Assistance Program.
- A community scholarship fund to help community members interested in pursuing an Associates or Bachelor's degree in early childhood education
- Updating municipal zoning ordinances to better accommodate the operation of childcare programs; review water, fire safety and wastewater requirements for ways to make it more feasible to operate a child care facility in the community
- Working with community members and early childhood educators to create a new regulated childcare program (more information below in step 4).
- Establish a revolving loan fund to support new businesses, like childcare

For potential state partners and childcare models, see "Resources" below.

4. Develop and communicate your plan.

After you've identified priority solutions, map out an action plan. Depending on the scale of your project, this can be a short, bulleted list of action steps, or a longer comprehensive community childcare plan.

Communicate your plan with the community, especially those who offered ideas through your survey or other engagement efforts. Circling back with those who are most interested will help inform and strengthen your efforts.

If one of your action steps is to launch a new childcare program: Be sure your program meets all state and local regulations. Suggested steps include:

- Reviewing information provided by the Child Development Division of the Vermont Department of Children and Families on becoming a childcare provider.
- Determining what kind of program you want to open (registered Family Child Care Home, licensed Family Child Care Home, licensed Center-Based Child Care and Preschool Program, licensed After-School Program) and what type of operating structure you want to set up (non-profit, for profit, co-op). See the Small Business Administration's guide "How to Start A Quality Childcare Business" for a helpful overview (link under "Resources" below).
- Establishing a business plan and exploring a variety of funding options. (See "Budgeting and Fundraising" for starting tips.) Contact state and regional partners for current advice on childcare funding opportunities.
- Reviewing Vermont's Child Care Program Regulations for detailed information on licensing requirements. These are differentiated by the program type you choose – Family Child Care Homes, Center-Based Child Care and Preschool Program, or Afterschool Child Care Programs.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

The Child Development Division (CDD) of the Vermont Department for Children and Families is the state agency responsible for overseeing the state's child care system.

CDD can provide more information about how to start a child care program, licensing requirements, quality improvement, existing child care programs, etc. Contact child care licensing through their “Child Care Licensors of the Day” at ahs. dcfcddchildcarelicensing@vermont.gov or 241-0837 dcf.vermont.gov/cdd.

Building Bright Futures is Vermont’s public-private partnership for early childhood. The organization hosts regional councils of community members who work together to implement the state’s Early Childhood Action Plan and address the needs of young children and their families. Regional Councils are a natural convening of key community members and groups that may be interested in supporting your work. buildingbrightfutures.org.

First Children’s Finance, a national non-profit that focuses on increasing the supply and business sustainability of excellent childcare, operates a statewide office in Vermont. It has granted over \$4 million to start up and expand childcare in Vermont since 2023. It conducts research such as the supply of and demand for childcare study, updated annually. First Children’s Finance can also work with communities to support assessment and development of childcare solutions. For more information, reach out to infovt@firstchildrensfinance.org or visit firstchildrensfinance.org/vermont/

Your local Regional Planning Commission (RPC) may have experience addressing child care in the area and be able to offer support. They may also be able to provide guidance on actions the municipality can take to support the project. Find yours here: vapda.org/.

Regional development corporations (RDCs) may also be a good resource in connecting to economic development funds and integrating with regional business leaders: accd.vermont.gov/economic-development/resources/rdc.

Business plan support is available through the Vermont Small Business Development Center. vtsbdc.org.

The Vermont Student Assistance Corporation helps to administer a number of community and private scholarship opportunities for Vermont students. You can learn more about their scholarship programs at vsac.org.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

First Children’s Finance administers the Infant/Toddler Capacity Building Grant Program and also lends money through its community development financial institution to expand childcare availability. letsgrowkids.org/early-educator-resources.

The Vermont Community Foundation could help to fund a community-based child care program that expands availability. vermontcf.org.

Your local or regional bank may have a number of loan programs geared towards projects that improve community welfare.

USDA Rural Development has funding that could support the development of community facilities such as a childcare program. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh for grant and contact information.

The Vermont Community Loan Fund can also be a partner in childcare development. investinvermont.org.

Other Guides, Tools and Resources

Let's Grow Kids was a nonprofit advocating from 2014 to 2024 for all Vermont Families to have affordable access to high-quality early care and education. They created a number of useful reports and toolkits. Find the following and more on their website at this link: letsgrowkids.org

2023's Act 76 was landmark legislation that changed the structure of the State's investment in childcare; this resource summarizes the effects of the legislation: dcf.vermont.gov/cdd/laws-rules/h.217

Vermont Afterschool supports school-age childcare and afterschool opportunities. <http://vermontafterschool.org/>.

Building Bright Futures in addition to offering technical assistance, gathers data and reporting, and curates news and other updates. buildingbrightfutures.org.

VT Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC) is an accrediting organization for Vermont and hosts a range of professional development for early childhood educators. They have a number of programs, grants, and reports that support professional childcare providers. You can learn more here: vtaeyc.org

Early Learning Nation is a national resource offering guidance on creating a municipal landscape that is supporting child care and early learning programs. Their online Progress Rating Tool (progressratingtool.earlylearningnation.com/) allows users to self-assess the steps their community has taken to support child care, and offers a detailed list of supportive actions that can be taken on the community level to increase child care options and availability.

Vermont Department of Children and Families (<https://dcf.vermont.gov>) offers information, assistance and support for the following programs and services:

- STARS Guide for Parents provides information on locating high-quality childcare in Vermont
- Bright Futures Child Care Information System is an online directory of childcare providers across the state
- Information on Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance Program
- Information on Regional Child Care Support Agencies
- Information on Becoming a Child Care Provider
- Childcare licensing regulations for:
 - Family Child Care Homes
 - Center Based Child Care and Preschool Programs
 - Afterschool Child Care Programs

U.S. Small Business Administration – How to Start a Quality Child Care Business [sba.gov](https://www.sba.gov)

Childcare Canada – Community Child Care Needs Assessment Toolkit includes sample survey questions, and recommendations on how to manage the needs assessment process: childcarecanada.org

City of Milpitas, California – Child Care Master Plan gives a good example of a comprehensive community child care plan: milpitas.gov/

Model Vermont Projects

Craftsbury Saplings began as a community-driven initiative to expand access to child care. The program uses space donated by the East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church, the meal program receives donations from Pete's Greens and other local farms, volunteers from the Craftsbury Community Care Center and Sterling College regularly help out, and the program is able to offer scholarships thanks to funding from the town. You can learn more about the program through their website craftsburysaplings.com.

Ski Areas at Stratton, Killington, Jay Peak and Stowe created successful community childcare programs. firstchildrensfinance.org/success-stories/vermont-ski-resorts.



CRAFTSBURY: Community-Based Childcare Solutions

The Saplings childcare project demonstrates how community-led leadership, powered by both new voices and steady behind-the-scenes champions can turn a shared need into lasting infrastructure for families and the local economy. After Craftsbury's 2015 Community Visit revealed the depth of local childcare needs, a dedicated group stepped up. Young parents took on visible leadership roles while experienced community members mentored from behind the scenes. Together, they formed a nonprofit, built a board, hired a director, and secured space, funding, and permits, expanding their vision after a feasibility study revealed even greater regional demand. Despite site changes and leadership transitions, the group kept the community engaged and invested throughout. Saplings opened in 2017 and is now exploring a new location to grow from 19 to 42 children served daily.



Key Lesson: Leadership takes many forms and is intergenerational and sustained community engagement turns grassroots ideas into durable, community-owned solutions.

Address Substance Use in Your Community

Most Vermont communities are grappling with the challenge of substance use disorders. While Vermont has systems and services in place to support prevention, treatment, and recovery, community-based initiatives can help. Your efforts can connect people to key resources, create critical prevention strategies, and improve outcomes. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy, but Vermonters have found that the most effective prevention efforts include coordination across multiple environments, sectors, and providers. Here are some strategies.

ACTION STEPS

1. Build a coalition.

Gather a group of individuals in your community interested in addressing substance use and promoting prevention and recovery locally. Invite a cross-section of the community including health care providers and municipal leaders, as well as representatives from local schools, health and service organizations, faith groups, vocational associations, businesses, and any other concerned parties.

Connect with the Prevention Lead organization for your region. Your community may already have a substance-use coalition: healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/document/dsu-vermont-prevention-lead-organizations.pdf If possible, consult with recovery providers to identify individuals in recovery who may be willing to serve on the team and consult around strategy and needs.

As a coalition, build a vision and set of core values. What are you working toward? What changes would you most like to see? Will this group focus on prevention, treatment and recovery, or both? For process ideas, see “Developing A Community Vision.”

2. Understand the challenge.

As a team, consult with experts and service providers to further your group’s understanding of community-based prevention and evidence-based prevention practices. How can a community-based team, outside of the health care community, most effectively support recovery and community health?

As part of your research, consult with area resource providers, medical experts, law enforcement, and other partners. Vermont has 12 recovery centers around the state; consider connecting with the one nearest you for information and support.

Gather data about the extent of substance abuse in your community. The Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey is an important resource for youth data specific to a county or supervisory union (see healthvermont.gov/stats/population-health-surveys-data/youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrbs)

Map your community's recovery and prevention assets—who is working on this issue already? Think outside the box. Assets aren't always explicitly specific to substance use. Who is working to build belonging? Who is working to reduce isolation? Who is doing education about healthy relationships? etc.

Gather information on community members' concerns, how they view current challenges, and the resources that they want or need. Use a variety of tools in order to reach the most people, such as:

- surveys (online and paper)
- tabling at events with an interactive display or activity
- hosting a gathering with a topical speaker and time for people to share stories in small groups
- municipal webpage
- social media
- traditional media (newspaper, radio, etc.).

3. Develop strategies to address the challenge.

Based on community input, your research and consultations, and your goals, build a list of potential community-based strategies that could support prevention and recovery.

Many Vermont communities have developed projects to support prevention and recovery. There are multiple evidence-based strategies to advance this work. Here are some that communities have found successful:

Prevention and Community Building

- Disseminate useful information and offer prevention education. Use social media, press, community forums, health fairs, and other venues to share information about health, wellness, and prevention.
- Create and promote positive alternatives:
 - Identify family-friendly activities and promote them monthly. Opportunities could include cooking classes, arts and crafts, outdoor movies, sports, concert series, and outdoor recreation
 - Create and support afterschool and summer activities for local youth
 - Throw neighborhood or village block parties to celebrate community assets and connect neighbors
- Launch neighborhood, downtown, or village beautification and art projects, or other “place-making” efforts to build pride of place and community connection.

Treatment and Recovery

- Market and expand a “Drug Takeback” program in your community. Work with your local pharmacy and law enforcement to discover new opportunities throughout the year.
- Consult with experts to explore how to reduce access to substances. Techniques that have worked in some communities include tighter zoning on alcohol outlets, ordinances for smoke-/vape-free downtowns and town parks and stronger enforcement around underage drinking or other drug sale and use.

- Help people know where to get help. VT Helplink (vthelplink.org) is a great resource. Develop and share a comprehensive list of local recovery and prevention resources.
- Develop programming specifically for community members in recovery such as exercise classes, art or craft classes, and support groups. Connect to expert guidance and support, or other ways to help participants connect, share stories, and offer mutual support.
- Organize educational forums, bringing in expert guidance, for prescribers and dispensers of medications to build strategies and structure to work together in collaboration.
- Develop networking and connection among area care providers to promote resource sharing, coordination, and improved communication.

4. Choose action priorities.

Gather your coalition to review the list of strategies and determine priorities for action. Which ideas will be actionable today? What will have the greatest impact in your community? See “Setting Priorities for Action.”

At this stage, it may be helpful to make another specific push to solicit ideas from the community. Consider hosting an event or conducting a poll to determine community members’ priorities and their interest in the programming your team has identified.

Select priorities and develop a plan to put them into place.

If funding is required, develop a budget and build a fundraising plan. See “Budgeting and Fundraising.”

5. Continually engage the community.

At each step of your efforts, consult with the community and inform them of your efforts. Community invitation and connection, pride, and a sense of ownership are key to the success of community-based prevention strategies.

- Host forums and events so people can learn more.
- As your work moves forward, share stories and accomplishments.
- Create opportunities for individuals to take meaningful volunteer action in addressing substance use issues.
- For more outreach ideas, see “Communicating with the Community.”

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

The Vermont Department of Health Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs oversees a network of health promotion, prevention, intervention, treatment and

recovery services. They can help develop local strategies and point to local, regional, and statewide resources. healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drugs.

To learn more about Community Prevention and how it works, the Department of Health has compiled an excellent resource here: healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drug-abuse/programs-services/how-prevention-works.

The Vermont Association for Mental Health and Addiction Recovery/Recovery Vermont is a statewide organization dedicated to supporting recovery and mental health. Recovery Vermont is also responsible for the training of recovery coaches throughout the state, a very strong network. Contact info@recoveryvermont.org or visit recoveryvermont.org.

The Vermont Recovery Network supports access to recovery services. The twelve recovery centers in the state are invaluable community resources. Find the one nearest you and connect with their leadership. Find a list of these centers on the Vermont Recovery Network website here: vtrecoverynetwork.org/centers.

Vermont Afterschool would be an excellent partner if you are working to develop out of school time programming for youth. vermontafterschool.org.

UP for Learning and their Getting to Y program employs youth leadership, partnerships with adults, participatory action research, and peer and community engagement, to build their capacity for future civic engagement and effect sustainable change in youth behavior, community and school culture. upforlearning.org/initiatives/getting-to-y/.

The Vermont Agency of Education could be a partner in programming to support substance abuse prevention in youth. education.vermont.gov/student-support/healthy-and-safe-schools/substance-abuse-prevention.

Funding

The Vermont Community Foundation provides funding for programs that spark community connection and help to close the opportunity gap in communities. To find out more about their grant programs visit vermontcf.org.

The Department of Health provides several grants to support community prevention. healthvermont.gov/alcohol-drug-abuse/programs-services/prevention-programs

Guides and other resources

The Vermont Substance Abuse Treatment & Recovery Directory: healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/ADAP_Treatment_Directory.pdf

Project Vision is a model in Rutland City of a collaboration of resources and services to address various community challenges, including abuse and addiction. projectvisionrutland.com.

The Deerfield Valley Community Partnership is an excellent model of a community-based prevention strategy. healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/ADAP_Deerfield_Valley_Community_Partnership.pdf.

Climate and Energy Resilience



Create Local Climate and Energy Action

As climate disturbances and changing weather patterns continue to impact Vermont and cause significant economic challenges to communities needing to rebuild from flooding, account for crop loss, manage health impact from wildfire smoke or extreme heat, and more. It is more important than ever to look at the economic impacts, opportunities, and strategies of transitioning to a non-fossil fuel-based economy. Communities are seeking ways to adapt by building resilient infrastructure, investing in mitigation such as renewable energy generation, expanding climate related job opportunities, and more.

ACTION STEPS

1. Assess climate and resilience planning and work completed.

Review your official town plan, local emergency management plan and other available documents to understand the topics and conversations around energy and climate in your community. All towns are required to have an energy section in their town plan, and some towns have developed enhanced energy plans that include specific goals tied to Vermont's Comprehensive Energy Plan.

Some key questions to ask are:

- Has your community been impacted in the last decade from climate impacts? And if so, what are they?
- What are your community vulnerabilities to climate disturbances? (See "Community Climate Resilience.")

Once you have gathered the information already underway, you can begin to identify the gaps and areas to pursue additional work.

2. Recruit a team and choose a structure.

Energy use and climate impacts span across many categories and users, so working with a diverse group will enhance your effectiveness and will inform the projects you take on. You can take a couple of different approaches to recruit a team:

Project-based organizing: It can be easier to recruit others when you're working on a specific project. Window Dressers or the Efficiency Vermont's Button-Up Campaign (see project list below) are examples of local projects that require a small team to organize. Solar for municipal or school buildings is another tangible project with a strong track record of success. Under this model, you organize around the selected project, finding those who are willing to join in implementation. The group can then evolve into a more permanent energy and climate committee to take on other projects.

Forming an energy or climate action committee: Another approach is to build a group of volunteers and together identify priorities that match the interests of the team. Nearly

100 towns in Vermont have an energy and climate committee or coordinator. In some places, it may make sense to form a multi-town committee. For excellent tools to start a local energy and climate committee, see the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network under “Resources” (below).

Some energy and climate committees are formal sub-committees that are part of municipal government, while some partner with conservation commissions particularly around food systems, floodplain restoration and other climate resilient infrastructure projects. Others are simply an ad-hoc group of individuals. Each approach is worthy of careful consideration as you get started.

	Municipal Committee	Ad-hoc or Independent Committee
Possible Advantages	Formal connection with the town can enable the group to get more done. It also can mean receiving staff support and financial support from the municipality.	The group is free to set priorities and membership without any limitations or formal town involvement. The work of the group does not fall under laws governing municipalities.
Possible Disadvantages	Must follow laws that apply to municipal committees, including open-meeting laws, freedom-of-information, etc. Often members must be appointed by the select board.	Without a formal connection to the municipality, any efforts requiring municipal involvement or approval may face a greater challenge.

As you consider and recruit the core group of people committed to achieving the group’s energy goals, consider:

- Who are the community members who are already active, addressing energy issues on social media or community listservs?
- Is there anyone with professional expertise in an energy-related field?
- Invite as diverse a group as possible, thinking beyond obvious allies. For instance, are there business owners, landlords, or others who share a concern about climate and energy but may see the topic from a different angle? Building a team from across the community will amplify the committee’s credibility and can help future cross-sector partnerships. (See “Inviting the Public.”)
- Having a direct and open channel of communication with municipal leadership and other institutional partners (school, hospital, large non-profits) can also be valuable in helping to accelerate projects, build trust, and enable transparency to the whole community.
- The size of the group will depend on the size of your community, but in general, 5-7 people is large enough to ensure good participation, but not too large to manage.

Connecting with other Energy and Climate Committees in nearby towns can be a great way of gathering ideas and advice and will help build your local network. In some instances, multi-town committees can reach critical mass and enable collaboration. The Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN) is helpful in connecting to other local energy champions (see Resources below). Your local Regional Planning Commission can also be helpful in making connections and providing support.

Recruitment is never over. New members provide new energy and perspective. At events and through other means, continually communicate about your work, celebrate successes, and invite greater participation in your group. This helps maintain community interest and even create opportunities for leadership succession as some members move on from the committee. See “Communicating with the Community.”

3. Research the issues.

As you consider how you will be most effective, you and your team can review energy and climate issues both statewide and in your community.

A good starting point is the work of the Vermont Climate Action Office, including the state of Vermont climate today, Vermont Climate Action Plan, Resilience Implementation Strategy, and other tools available at climatechange.vermont.gov/.

A visual representation of current trends exists with the Vermont Energy Dashboard and Vermont Greenhouse Gas Emissions Dashboard maintained by the Energy Action Network (EAN) which includes a variety of data on energy use in all Vermont towns. Find them here: eanvt.org/dashboards. EAN publishes an annual report that provides an in-depth analysis of where Vermont stands relative to its climate commitments and energy goals. Search “Annual Progress Report” here: eanvt.org.

It is also helpful to understand energy expenses for a typical Vermont household. Efficiency Vermont’s Energy Burden Report shows that about 50% of a typical Vermont household’s energy spending is for transportation, with the remainder split between electricity and home heating/cooling. Explore the most recent Energy Burden report and interactive dashboards mapping energy burden by town and census blocks. Search for “Energy Burden Report” here: efficiencyvermont.com.

4. Set priorities for action.

As you bring your committee together (or renew your efforts), strategic planning will help you guide your work and build team cohesion. An action plan identifies the committee’s interests and helps assess how you can have the greatest impact.

An energy and climate committee can promote and encourage, but for the most part, they are not the “decider” when it comes to various energy-related investments and behavior changes. Energy use and greenhouse gas emissions are the result of countless decisions made by individuals, businesses, and institutions. At their most successful, energy and climate committee energy committees serve as an indispensable resource, helping area residents, businesses, towns and institutions to make informed choices that reduce costs and emissions. Energy and climate committees can also serve as a connector/facilitator, bringing statewide and regional resources into the community through events and programs. It is worthwhile to consider the most effective roles the committee can play as you develop priorities.

This chart can be a helpful tool in thinking through your areas of focus:

	Individuals	Businesses	The municipality, schools, and other institutions
Building Electricity			
Building Heating and Cooling			
Transportation			
Climate Workforce			

Data can help inform your decision-making about priorities. Refer to the data sources listed above as you consider where to focus your work. At the same time, be careful not to focus so much on metrics and very specific emissions or kWh calculations that it inhibits the work of moving projects forward. Let data inform your efforts and provide a measure of success without hamstringing your work.

As you get started, you may want to identify some “quick wins” to create momentum and build cohesion with your team. Rarely does an energy and climate committee or a municipality have the expertise or financial resources to take on an energy or resilience project alone. Successful energy committees join with available partners and programs to achieve tangible results.

Once you have a group of people who are interested, establish your internal structure. Will you have a chair, treasurer and secretary? Will you establish sub-groups to work on different topic areas? How will you communicate with the public about your work? Some committees find it helpful to develop a mission statement or other foundational document to set their direction. Others prefer a more informal structure.

Ideas for Energy Projects and Initiatives

Communities across Vermont have taken creative steps to reduce energy use and strengthen their local energy economy. Here are some examples to inspire your efforts:

The Button-Up program can be a great first step for an energy and climate committee. It started as a fall counterpart to Green-Up Day, encouraging Vermonters to take steps to reduce energy usage as the weather begins to cool. Efficiency Vermont hosts Button-Up statewide. The program gives town energy and climate committees tools to engage community members in thermal efficiency projects.

Window Dressers is a non-profit organization that hosts town- or region-based efforts to construct seasonal window inserts for local residents using volunteers. While running a Window Dressers program is intense, it also follows a consistent format from town-to-town, and can be a good way to engage new community members.

Forming strong connections with the municipal staff or volunteers responsible for town facilities will help your energy and climate committee’s success. Often municipalities have a long list of infrastructure projects, and energy-related improvements don’t always rise to the top of the list. As you consider where your town’s most effective investments

might be, you can start by conducting a town-wide inventory of current energy systems. This can be as simple as an overview of public heating systems, or as in-depth as a detailed energy audit for all municipal buildings. Work with your municipality and state efficiency programs to highlight opportunities for increased efficiency and identify retrofits, retro-commissioning and weatherization projects that could ultimately save the town (and taxpayers) money. Keep in mind that buildings of historical significance may qualify for additional funding. Many town municipal buildings received energy audits during the Municipal Energy Resilience Program and have a list of projects they could take on to improve their municipal buildings.

Develop a community solar project. Many schools and municipalities are participating in local solar projects to help generate more renewable energy and bring down energy costs. These reduced costs ultimately get passed along to taxpayers. To get started, engage with your local school or town to figure out their electricity costs and whether they are already participating in a solar project. Share with them the different ways that schools and towns have gone solar. You might also consider engaging one or more solar developers. Some specialize in working with schools and municipalities and can answer questions and resolve concerns. Sometimes a local energy and climate committee serving as the liaison to a solar developer and helping navigate the regulatory landscape is all that is needed to get a local solar project off the ground.

Host public events to raise awareness of energy-related technologies and the variety of programs and rebates available. Your committee can produce and distribute educational materials highlighting new energy-saving opportunities, and can host forums, fairs or other events with guest speakers. Some committees also host energy-efficient home tours. Efficiency Vermont offers a number of workshops. Your regional planning commission may be able to help staff and promote these events.

Promote electric vehicles (EVs) and electric tools. EVs and electric yard tools represent an enormous opportunity to cut carbon emissions and reduce transportation costs over time. Energy and climate committees can promote EVs in many ways such as helping to install public charging stations or hosting events that bring EV and e-tool owners together with those curious to learn more. Lending libraries have started to include tool sheds and are a great way to collectively build out electric tool access and shared use.

Partner with statewide efficiency programs to offer special promotions to your community. Efficiency Vermont offers an array of programs to support Vermonters, and they understand the value of working with an energy and climate committee to get things done (see Resources below).

Be a champion of public transit and alternative transportation. For instance:

- Work with your local public transit provider to identify opportunities for residents and organize a ride-the-bus-campaign.
- If your area is not served by public transit, you can develop a community carpool program.
- Offer free bike tune-up days and work to improve walking and bike infrastructure in your downtown.
- See “Improve Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Accessibility” for more ideas.

Reducing waste is an important element of sustainability. Look at ways of auditing your community waste stream. Connect with local composters and coordinate a town composting program. Offer free hazardous waste disposal days, sponsored by local businesses or community organizations.

Develop an energy resiliency campaign that highlights the value of community micro-storage of power. Having small-scale, distributed battery back-up can not only be helpful during a power outage, but in some cases can help electrical utilities flatten peak demand curves and reduce both their generation needs and cost for ratepayers. Many electric companies have rebates for wall-mounted battery backup systems for individuals and businesses.

Some rebates exist even for things like electric lawnmowers and electric bicycles! Check in frequently with your local utility and with state efficiency programs for the latest programs.

Contribute to your town's Energy Plan. Each municipality is statutorily required to include an element in the Town Plan addressing energy consumption, and under Act 174, towns also have the option of developing enhanced energy plans. Offering your assistance and expertise as a committee can transform this chapter from a legal requirement to a dynamic guiding document.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

The Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN) is a great resource for technical assistance and connection to other energy and climate committees around the state. vecan.net.

Efficiency Vermont is the largest state-wide efficiency provider. They have dozens of programs, incentives and rebates designed to help communities lower their energy consumption. Visit efficiencyvermont.com and learn more about their community work here: efficiencyvermont.com/services/education-events/community-economic-partnerships.

Your local electric utility company may have programs or staff that can be of service. All Vermont utilities are providing programs and incentives to help their customers shift away from fossil fuels. Find service providers in your region using the interactive utility map here: publicservice.vermont.gov/electric/electric_service_territory_map

Vermont Electric Coop – vermontelectric.coop.

Washington Electric Coop – washingtonelectric.coop.

Green Mountain Power – greenmountainpower.com.

Most of Vermont's Municipal Utilities – See here for a list: vppsa.com/members.

Your local Regional Planning Commission can be of great help in accessing town and regional energy plans, town energy data, and in staffing energy related events. Find yours here: vapda.org/.

Your local public transit provider may be interested in helping with initiatives that promote ridership. To find the provider nearest you visit connectingcommuters.org/bus-info/bus-providers.

The Energy Action Network (EAN) is a great resource for data and analysis. They publish an Annual Progress Report for Vermont on energy, affordability, and emissions. They also provide interactive dashboards on Vermont energy and greenhouse gas emissions, eanvt.org.

The Department of Public Service can be a great resource in exploring state programs for consumer payment assistance for utilities, and the state level Comprehensive Energy Plan, publicservice.vermont.gov.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Window Dressers brings community volunteers of all economic and social situations together to improve the warmth and comfort of interior spaces and lower heating costs by producing low-cost insulating window inserts that function as custom, interior-mounted storm windows. windowdressers.org/vermont-community-builds

Drive Electric Vermont is a resource for plug-in electric vehicles including incentives, educational content, and more. Visit: driveelectricvt.com.

Funding

The New England Grass Roots Environmental Fund has jumpstarting grants for small projects. grassrootsfund.org.

The Vermont Community Foundation may be able to identify funding sources for local projects. vermontcf.org.

USDA Rural Development Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) grants could fund smaller scale renewable projects. Visit rd.usda.gov/vt-nh and search for “REAP” grant information and contacts.

The Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development may have grants to support a utility scale energy initiative, electric vehicle charging infrastructure, and more. accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp.

There are many private foundations in Vermont that may have interest in funding education and youth-related initiatives. You can search using keywords like “environmental conservation” “energy” “sustainability” or other words that relate to your work, or you can search by geographic area.

Cause IQ maintains a directory of Vermont-based grantmaking foundations. causeiq.com/directory/foundations-list/vermont-state/.

Guides and Other Resources

For anyone looking to start a local Town Energy and Climate Committee, the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN) is a great resource. This is an assembly of local town energy and climate committees and templates. Find “Resources” here: vecan.net.

Vermont Climate Action Office developed the Vermont Climate Action Plan, Resilience Implementation Strategy, and other tools available at climatechange.vermont.gov/.

Examples of Successful Community Projects

The Huntington Vermont Energy Committee led an effort to install a solar array on the Town Garage, completing utility bill audits of municipal buildings, and supporting energy navigation for homeowners. Contact the committee here: huntingtonvt.org/energy-committee.

The Climate Economy Action Center of Addison County came out of the Middlebury Climate Economy Model Community program hosted by VCRD in 2017. The non-profit has since inventoried county wide Greenhouse gas emissions and stood up an Energy Navigator program to help individuals reduce their home’s carbon footprint. ceacac.org.

Middlebury, Pownal, and Randolph were the first three communities to participate in the Climate Economy Model Communities Program hosted by VCRD. In this brief summary you can find case studies of their work to promote local farms, deploy a neighborhood energy project, and invest in local electric vehicle charging stations: vtrural.org/sites/default/files/Overview%20and%20ProfilesFinal.pdf.

HARDWICK: Community Climate Resilience



The Town of Hardwick and its surrounding communities have long been committed to community disaster preparedness and response. Between 2020 and 2024, the Town of Hardwick faced significant emergency events, including a pandemic and multiple devastating floods. Throughout these crises, the community demonstrated its resilience and unwavering commitment to supporting one another. Since then, the town officials and community members have worked diligently to document and refine a sustainable framework based on the lessons learned from past disaster events. The Hardwick Local Emergency Plan addendum brings together the collective expertise, perspectives, and insights of key stakeholders— including the Town of Hardwick government, the Hardwick Neighbor to Neighbor organization, community partners, local businesses, volunteers, and residents. By fostering coordination and addressing challenges headon, the approach outlined in the addendum ensures that the community remains strong, resilient, and prepared in times of crisis. <https://hardwickvt.gov/lemp-addendum/>

Lesson: Collaborative, grassroots approaches, grounded in a deep understanding of the importance of unity during emergencies, will strengthen response efforts.

Community Climate Resilience

Increased precipitation, flooding, wildfire smoke and drought: Vermont's communities are experiencing many of these events. In the past decades, widespread flooding brought devastating effects such as loss of housing, roads, bridges and residents who still are unable to return to their communities. Communities, even those which were spared these effects, are taking note and looking to build resilience, defined as the capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties. This can include future floods, drought, wildfire smoke, extreme heat, and other natural disasters as well as social disturbances such as pandemics, political turmoil, or other emergencies.

Building community resilience includes preparedness actions that, if completed, can decrease impacts of future disasters such as assessment of existing resources and infrastructure; improving community well-being and connections; conducting gap analysis and planning; prioritization for needed projects based on community needs; and funding for implementation.

Resilience and Recovery: Intertwined Concepts

A central concept underlying community resilience and recovery is investment in the social infrastructure required in emergencies and their aftermath. Deepening social capital means communities can respond quickly to individual and community needs, connect to resources, coordinate work between many groups and partners, and ultimately move recovery projects forward. Towns, volunteer groups and nonprofits often have specific roles and tasks that must be coordinated to enable cohesive response and recovery. Some partners include municipal staff, local and regional nonprofits, community volunteers, regional planning commissions, regional development corporations, state entities, community-based organizations, and many others. Action steps discussed below bring these actors together to learn and plan together - creating relationships and understanding that is central to community resilience.

The intertwinedness of individual resilience with community resilience cannot be overstated. When communities have strong social connections and individuals are accounted for and part of a strong community they have the ability to tend to broader community needs more successfully. Not only are the strong individual social connections essential to community resilience, communities that incorporate individual resilience building into community resilience tend to have higher individual involvement, connection, and commitment during an emergency situation - if people have a plan and feel their families are safe they are able to show up for the broader community.

ACTION STEPS

1. Conduct Assessments of Existing Resources and Infrastructure.

In order to prepare and recover from natural disasters communities should generate an inventory of community assets, identification of who to engage, and what supports and

resources exist. This will also identify the gaps and areas to build connections and resources. Consider framing what exists on the individual level and what exists on a community or municipal level. For example case management support and resource identification for individual recovery needs may exist through the long-term recovery group, while resources for emergency managers may exist with the state (Vermont Emergency Management) or connecting municipalities for planning, procurement, or other larger scale support at the community level.

Some areas to consider when doing the assessment include:

- Who are the players that need to be at the table? List all of the non-profits, municipalities, schools, business leaders, local emergency managers, church groups, impassioned community go-getters, etc.
- What resources and assets does each group bring? This helps map what their roles may be in an emergency or response situation.
- What planning documents exist? Where are they and who knows the content of them? How does the community know about these? How are they used in an emergency situation and are there planning events that play out scenarios using these documents? Building on local plans, such as the Local Emergency Management Plan (LEMP), with coordinated neighborhood and community connections is a great way to add voices to the municipal level planning (see Hardwick's call out box).
- Where is the vulnerable infrastructure? Map this with the road crew, wastewater and water operators and others intimate with the town infrastructure.
- What tools have been used to assess the vulnerabilities of your community? One that exists is the Municipal Climate Change Vulnerability Indicators Tool, or the Community Resilience Assessment linked in resources.
- What community gathering spaces exist?
- What community support and services exist?

2. Improve Community Well-being and Connections.

This occurs within communities in many forms everyday and is critical to building social connections that can then be activated during a disaster. Some examples include: desk top exercises that include key actors, or education campaigns on the Local Emergency Management Plan (LEMP) and other emergency documents/plans. See the chapters on *Expand and Improve Community Communications* and *Develop Events that Strengthen Community*.

3. Gap Analysis and Planning.

Based on the community assessment, and social connections developed, a group of core community members could come together to be communally familiar with resource/assets/gaps and risk mapping. This group could brainstorm together actions that this group (or another existing group or one to be formed) can do to reduce risk and reinforce assets/resources. The outcomes of this action include improved social cohesion and communal understanding of assets, resources and gaps. With the

community, this group can initiate and develop a brainstormed list of actions to take to fill gaps and/or build upon existing assets to reduce risks for cohesive climate resilience planning, see the State of Vermont Municipal Climate Planning Framework and Guide or the Resilience Hub Toolkit www.resiliencetoolkit.org.

For example, some possible gaps identified can be classified into different categories with different lead organizers such as:

- Infrastructure actions - reinforce/ broaden culverts in specific sections of town led by the municipality.
- Community education - discussions with local Emergency Directors and community on the LEMP or community discussions on preparedness actions at individual level led by the local Long-Term Recovery Group or similar entity..
- Municipal preparedness - fundraising or donations for a municipal immediate response supply kit (Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), muck out gear/tools, first aid kits, fresh water, etc.)
- Develop a volunteer and material database - The local core organizing group could manage and populate a database with community members contact information, their skills, equipment such as backhoes or generators, and more.

Prioritization for needed projects: Through strategic planning and assessment of existing resources, projects and processes may be identified to build community resilience. Using the steps in the chapter “Setting Priorities for Action” your community can build out a roadmap for what to take on first and garner community ideas and the set priorities for action.

Funding projects and implementation: This step often stalls communities due to the extensive financial requirements to implement identified projects and expertise needed to manage climate resilience projects. Don't be deterred! With creative thinking, connection to key resources and people (see the lists below) projects can come to fruition to support community resilience. Determine ways to break down each project into smaller steps and see if there are local funding sources or donation opportunities available to support those initial steps. Small wins early on such as a “go-bag” workshop with supplies to distribute to individuals, scenario planning on town meeting day, or other ways to demonstrate climate resilience, will all prepare and connect the community.

Ongoing learning, planning, and reflection: The key to successful recovery and resilience and future preparedness is to practice processes in the emergency plans, continue to build community connections and cohesion, check in on the validity of the plans and actions, and continue community education during “blue skies”. Towns that have “blue sky” plans with realistic goals and actions stay resilient and ready better than those that don't. Remember that building resilience is ongoing even after the community feels safe again. A big challenge of “blue sky” times is that processes and procedures that were stood up become stagnant and/or knowledge is lost. One way to continue learning is by regularly bringing scenarios and information to your community. Identify when your community comes together already, such as Town Meeting, Old Homes Days, harvest or other festivals, 4th of July parades, etc, and use those times to reflect and plan ahead. The structure and processes that arise in the moment of recovery may or may not be the long term structure and “blue sky” times enable reflection of what and who should

be the lead for recovery and longer term resilience efforts. Regional collaboration and learning can also occur to better connect and support small towns and communities.

All situations are different, and likely will change over time. It's important to build social resilience so that a region, community, or neighborhood has the tools to access the resources they need, communicate, and proactively move forward. This is successful by building on lessons learned, learning from others, documenting, and reflecting back in order to adjust as needed.

RESOURCES

Who Can Help

Community Resilience Organizations (CROs). gocros.org

Flood Resilience Listserv. This group has monthly virtual meet ups and shares information about programs, resources, and connects folks across Vermont working on flood resilience. floodresilience@list.uvm.edu. To subscribe send a message to: listserv@list.uvm.edu with no subject. In the message body type: subscribe flood resilience My Name (please use your name!).

Vermont's Long Term Recovery Groups (LTRG) each serve a different region and exist to coordinate recovery efforts among communities, municipalities, and resource providers. They also provide support for those people and households directly impacted by disasters. Learn about the concept in-general at disasterphilanthropy.org/cdp-resource/long-term-recovery-groups, and find the LTRG in your area here: disasterrecovery.vermont.gov/individuals/long-term-recovery-groups.

Vermont State Office of Disaster Recovery helps communities rebuild and recover after natural disasters and emergencies with links to resources. Search "Long Term Recovery Groups (LTRG's)" at disasterrecovery.vermont.gov for a map of current LTRG's in the state.

Vermont Climate Action Office: for links to the state of Vermont climate today, Vermont Climate Action Plan, Resilience Implementation Strategy, and other tools. climatechange.vermont.gov/.

Vermont League of Cities and Towns has a number of resources for disaster preparedness, response & recovery: vlct.org/topics-all/disaster-preparedness-response-recovery.

Reach out to local and regional organizations – such as the Vermont Center for Independent Living (vcil.org) for guidance to support Deaf and/or disabled residents and USCRI Vermont (refugees.org/uscri-vermont/) for language access – to help make your efforts accessible to all residents.

Funding

The American Red Cross has immediate individual assistance for households impacted by disasters. redcross.org/about-us/our-work/disaster-relief.

Center for Disaster Philanthropy. disasterphilanthropy.org/cdp-funds/.

Salvation Army has donations and services for disaster communities: salvationarmyusa.org/.

Vermont Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster VOAD Members will have funding during disasters. vtvoad.org/.

Vermont Community Foundation Coates Fund vermontcf.org/funds/vt-disaster-relief/.

Vermont Emergency Management vem.vermont.gov/.

Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development offers these state funds as competitive programs to support a wide range of local planning and implementation projects, including updating town plans and land use regulations to support housing goals.

- Vermont Community Development Program (VCDP) offers competitive federal grants (like CDBG funds) to help towns address local housing needs, upgrade public facilities, and recover from disasters. See accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/vcdp.
- Municipal Planning Grants (MPG): MPG's are administered by the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). Learn more by working with your regional planning commission. accd.vermont.gov/community-development/funding-incentives/municipal-planning-grant.

The US Department of Housing & Urban Development Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) is a larger source of funding. Ask your Regional Planning Commission to work with you. Search "CDBG-DR" at hudexchange.info.

Other Guides, Tools, and Resources

Community Resilience Assessment (CRA): Community Resilience Organization developed this assessment for communities to identify vulnerabilities and strengths. The CRA is divided into four sections: Basic Needs & Services, Environment & Natural Systems, Physical Infrastructure, and Community Connections & Capacity. gocros.org/community-resilience-assessment/

Vermont Healthy Communities program developed an extensive toolbox you can find here: healthycommunitiesvt.com.

Resilience Hub Toolkit: Work outlined in the toolkit is complementary to existing flood or disaster preparedness efforts and plans and can be taken on by any group of people, regardless of official roles or access to financial resources. The toolkit lives on an online/offline interface at resiliencetoolkit.org; you can download the whole Toolkit at resiliencetoolkit.org/downloads. Requests for printed toolkits and support using the toolkit via resiliencetoolkit@gocros.org.

Rebuild by Design – Search "Atlas of Disaster Vermont" at rebuildbydesign.org.

Groundswell Resilience Hub - groundswell.org/community-resilience-hubs/, <http://groundswell.org/rcm-framework/>.

Climate Action Office – Climate Toolkits: Municipal Climate Change Vulnerability Indicators Tool, Municipal Climate Planning Framework and Guide, and others: climatechange.vermont.gov.

Sustainable Economies Law Center Mutual Aid Legal Toolkit: theselc.org/mutual_aid_toolkit.

Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN) Resilience Hubs Materials and Resources resilience-hub.org.

Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD's) and Community Organizations Active in Disasters (COAD's). Search "VOAD" here: disasterphilanthropy.org.

National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster VOAD. Under Resource Center, search "Long term Recovery Guide" here: nvoad.org.

Vermont Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster VOAD: vtvoad.org.

Examples of Successful Community Projects

Town of Hardwick and Neighbor to Neighbor network of community groups working with the municipality to coordinate emergency management and preparedness. Visit hardwickvt.gov/lemp-addendum

Barre City and Barre Up — Barre City adopted its official Flood Resiliency Plan in November 2024 to guide ongoing recovery and infrastructure protection after successive severe floods. Search "Flood Resiliency Plan at barrecity.org. Barre Up, the Long Term Recovery Group, has mobilized volunteers and held workshops and community information sharing, neighborhood walks, scenario planning, and more. barreup.org.

Weston and Cabot Flood Resiliency Committees are a couple towns of many that have formed official municipal committees to support Flood Resiliency Projects in town. They are both focused on community support and engineering projects, using HUD's Community Development Block Grants -Disaster Recovery funds (CDBG - DR). Weston: westonvt.org/flood-resiliency-committee and Cabot: cabotvt.us/flood-resiliency-task-force.

Lamoille Hazard Mitigation & Resiliency Working Group — a group of town leaders from towns up and down the Lamoille River formed through Lamoille County Planning Commission to discuss mitigation projects and their impacts on towns up and downstream. This led to a robust group of town representatives who meet quarterly to check in on projects and situations that impact all towns along the Lamoille River. Search "Regional Emergency Management Committee" at lcpcvt.org.

Montpelier Strong — Foundation for a Resilient Montpelier is a new, action-oriented organization established to create a healthy and resilient city through facilitating democratic engagement, supporting community-led initiatives, and gathering and distributing resources. The new organization was born from the merger of the Montpelier Foundation and the Montpelier Commission for Recovery and Resilience. montpelierstrong.org.

The Northeast Kingdom has many groups that support resilience and recovery —two of them are KURRVE (Kingdom United Resilience & Recovery Effort) and NEK Organizing (NEKO) which share duties of immediate response and medium to long-term response to support the full 5 counties of the NEK. kurrve.org and nekorganizing.org.

III. Additional Resources

Strong local leadership grows from connection, learning, and shared experience. As you carry your community's work forward, you don't have to do it alone. Vermont is home to an extraordinary network of organizations, educators, and partners dedicated to supporting leaders at every stage — those stepping up for the first time, those deepening their skills, and those guiding long-term community efforts. This section shares statewide resources to help you strengthen your work, expand your team's capacity, and tap into the expertise available across Vermont. From leadership development programs and youth opportunities to guidance on diversity, equity, and inclusion, these materials are offered as practical supports you can adapt to your local context. They reflect the contributions of many partners who share a commitment to vibrant, inclusive, and resilient Vermont communities. As you explore these resources, we encourage you to use them as starting points — building on them, tailoring them, and combining them with the lived experience and creativity of your own community.

Vermont Leadership Programs

Being an effective leader is an ongoing process, one punctuated by continual introspection, re-evaluation, and personal development. Here in Vermont, we are fortunate to have not only a deep roster of dedicated citizens ready to step forward into leadership roles, but also an extensive network of professionals committed to supporting and developing new and existing leaders. Below is a list of organizations that offer varying degrees of support for Vermonters looking to get things done. It is by no means exhaustive, but is meant instead as a starting point to connect local movers and shakers to the supports they need to take their work to the next level.

The Snelling Center for Government's Vermont Leadership Institute ("VLI") gives participants the information, tools and inspiration to make greater contributions to their organizations, to their communities and to Vermont. snellingcenter.org.

Common Good Vermont is dedicated to supporting the non-profit sector across Vermont. Visit commongoodvt.org for resources and educational programs on topics including nonprofit management, fundraising, and more. They also maintain a list of leadership development professionals and trainers: commongoodvt.org/vermont-nonprofit-consultant-directory/.

Preservation Trust of Vermont is an organization committed to preserving and revitalizing Vermont's historic buildings. They offer a range of supportive services for anyone working in this arena, including topic-based retreats at the Grand Isle Lakehouse for 20-25 participants to come together, network, and connect with state leaders and resources to help forward local projects. ptvermont.org/our-work/retreats.

Agency of Natural Resource: Municipal Day is offered annually every fall, Municipal Day is a day-long conference hosted by ANR that offers training and ongoing support for local municipal officials. anr.vermont.gov/about_us/special-topics/municipal-day.

Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT) is committed to supporting municipalities in Vermont in a number of arenas. They offer training for municipal officials, workshops and ongoing support for municipalities through their Municipal Assistance Center (MAC). vlct.org/mac.

Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce: Leadership Champlain offers a year-long series of full-day seminars and overnight retreats geared at sparking and supporting emerging and current leadership in the Champlain Valley region. vermont.org/chamber.

Leadership Southeast Vermont is an intensive, immersive year-long multi-session leadership program much like Leadership Champlain or the Vermont Leadership Institute, but with a focus on the Southeastern region of the state. leadershipsevt.org.

Vital Communities: Leadership Upper Valley is a non-profit based in White River Junction. They offer a year-long cohort-based leadership program for local changemakers. vitalcommunities.org/leadershipuppervalley.

Northeast Kingdom Collaborative, Northeast Stewardship Center: NEK Leadership Institute. The NEK Collaborative is an organization committed to supporting a thriving and resilient Northeast Kingdom, including the three counties of Orleans, Essex, and Caledonia. Together with the Northeast Stewardship Center, they established the NEK Leadership Institute to support and foster leadership across the region. The program adheres to a similar model as other regional leadership programs, with 5 intensive day-long sessions. northwoodscenter.org/wordpress/outdoor-education/nek-leadership-institute.

Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity is a relationship-oriented training/consulting service with the social mission of making Vermont a desirable destination for all, particularly outdoor enthusiasts, tourists, conventioners, college students, entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists of color. They offer training and consulting as well as an annual conference to discuss issues of fairness and diversity and drive forward a vision of Vermont's multicultural future. vermontpartnership.org/what-we-do.

Vermont Council on Rural Development's Climate Catalysts Leadership Program brings together a cohort of 10 local leaders from Vermont communities for a year-long process focused on building peer connections, strengthening leadership skills and providing project development support for specific local projects spearheaded by each participant in their communities. vtrural.org/climatecatalysts.

Vermont Changemakers Table is a professional network for mission-driven young Vermonters committed to the future of Vermont and positive change. A collaboration between Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility (VBSR) and the High Meadows Fund, the group meets quarterly for dinner, conversation and inspiration with Vermont thought leaders. vbsr.org/vermont-changemakers-table.

The Vermont Institute for Government (VIG) is a non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the government remains responsive, accessible, and competent, by improving educational opportunities for local officials and the public regarding how government works. Since 1989, VIG has been creating educational materials, offering workshops, and collaborating on a variety of training and educational events for Vermont's town officers and citizens. vtinstituteforgovt.org.

Leadership Programs Designed for Youth

The Governor's Institutes of Vermont are a series of accelerated, residential summer programs for high schoolers and young artists in Vermont to come together on college campuses across the state and dive deeply into a topic area of their choosing. For more information, giv.org

Up for Learning offers a number of programs and initiatives designed to shift the youth-adult relationship at the heart of education to partnership, and to increase youth agency. upforlearning.org/initiatives.

University of Vermont Extension's 4-H Youth Leadership Programming offers a number of Teen and Leadership programs to enable teens to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and aspirations needed for success in the 21st century. uvm.edu/extension/youth/teen-leadership-program-offerings.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Definitions

Diversity

Diversity describes the difference in people's ethnicity, circumstances, backgrounds, and life experiences. The socioeconomic discrepancies between the wealthiest and least wealthy among us illustrate one area of great diversity in Vermont, while the fact that between 89-91% of our population identifies as white illustrates another in which we are far less diverse, at least as compared to other states.

That being said, statistics can be deceiving. The above percentage fails to highlight the fact that over 33,000 local business owners, municipal officials, community volunteers, teachers, spiritual leaders, mentors, friends and other Vermonters identify as people of color. They contribute untold vitality, energy, expertise, skills, economic investment and leadership to the state. The same dynamic exists for individuals with disabilities, folks of non-binary gender, varying sexuality, and other marginalized populations. Recognizing and celebrating diversity is not always about scanning the distant horizon; it's also offering a hand in friendship to your neighbor.

Equity

We are all familiar with the concept of equality, the state of two or more things being exactly the same. That all people be given equal pay for doing the same work, that all individuals be afforded the same rights in our judicial system, or that all citizens have an equal right to vote are but a few examples of the principle of equality engrained in our values, but never fully realized.

Equity, on the other hand, acknowledges the inherent differences in people's life experiences, circumstances, and backgrounds. It recognizes the fact that we live in a culture that, consciously and unconsciously, systematically privileges some at the expense of others. Asking what different populations need to be successful, what barriers currently impede their success, what discrimination and unfairness they may face, and how local efforts can respond—these are the kinds of questions to incorporate into your local planning efforts. Having diverse representation in your team can help to identify some of these differing needs and flag potential equity issues as they occur. Having a team that reflects that desired diverse community is also a way of putting equity values into practice. As you work to organize any project, it is essential to pay attention, to look through an equity lens, to be sure you are listening and understanding the realities and needs of all members of your community.

Inclusion

Inclusion comes from actively seeking out people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives and bringing them into your community-building process. Opportunities for inclusion exist in all phases of a project and on all scales, from cultivating a diverse core team of partners to spearhead a project, to collecting input from the broader community

in your community development work. Inclusion often means broadening one's outreach beyond traditional channels, or coming up with innovative solutions to reach populations across communication barriers.

Inclusion is about more than gathering input. It is also about extending opportunities for leadership and decision-making power to a diverse cross-section of the population. Often the most beneficial and long-lasting innovations occur when folks who have been historically marginalized are engaged in leadership from the outset of the project.

Reducing someone to a label defined by their difference from a majority group, then including them in a process just to be able to check the box, can itself be a process of marginalization. We all represent the various facets of our identity, and no single individual can entirely represent any group. Having someone on your team from an underrepresented racial or ethnic group can be incredibly valuable in helping broaden the group's perspective on certain issues, but expecting that individual to be the authority on the needs of the population to which they belong is unfair and misinformed.







Vermont Council on Rural Development
Building Community. Inspiring Action.

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