

Bennington Community Visit



Report and Action Plan
June 2012

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I. Introduction

Bennington is the gateway to Vermont and the cornerstone of its history. Its landscape of hill, valley, field, forest, and downtown, while unique in its beauty and character, is iconic of all the best of Vermont. The VCRD Community Visit Team was deeply impressed by the dynamism of the town and its tremendous assets. We recognized its deep commitment to its youth, its concerted efforts to advance the local economy, and its dedication to supporting the progress of all its citizens, especially those least fortunate.

With over 400 people involved in the process, and over 100 volunteers on the new task forces, Bennington has demonstrated its commitment to exploring issues and advancing priorities. Now comes the hard part. We commend everyone who has participated in the process so far, and everyone who contributes to the success of the Bennington priority efforts to make the town a great place to live, work and do business into the future.

We look forward to working with the Bennington Task Forces as the priority projects identified in the process move forward:

- **Advance a Bennington Community Center and Improve the Recreation Center**
- **Develop a Bennington Vision Statement and Advance Community Communications and Positive Town Image**
- **Collaborate to Address Poverty and Build a Poverty Working Group**
- **Make Downtown Bennington a Destination and Build a New Bennington Town Green**

The Vermont Council on Rural Development Community Visit Program is a structured process that enables a community to identify and prioritize goals, fosters local leadership, and serves as a catalyst for the development and realization of concrete, achievable action plans. The program in Bennington consisted of three phases:

1. On the **Community Visit Day** on March 15th, Visiting Team members heard testimony from Bennington residents in nine focus group areas that had earlier been identified by the local steering committee. Notes and issues raised in these sessions are detailed in Part VI. Based on the testimony received, the Vermont Council on Rural Development identified an initial list of the key **Opportunities** before the community (Part II).
2. The second stage of the Community Visit occurred at the Bennington **Community Meeting** on April 12th when VCRD presented the Opportunities list and facilitated the review and prioritization of these issues by town residents. The resulting list of **Bennington Priorities** (in Part III) were then the focus for the formation of four Task Forces established to build plans that would address them (see bulleted list above).
3. In the third phase of the Visit, the **Community Resource Day** on May 16th, the Task Forces met with a second Visiting Team to get organized, build Action Steps, and consider state, federal, non-profit, and private resources that may be available to support their work. The resulting **Task Force Work Plans** are listed in Part IV.

Resource Team Members (listed with contact information in Part VIII) signed on with a commitment to serve as sounding boards and referral agents for the Bennington Task Forces. Many of these visitors can be partners in the work before the committees; others can be great sources of advice or connection to other resources. **Call on them for help.**

Members of the Resource Team listened closely to the issues brought forward by town residents and have made suggestions in support of Bennington's efforts in each challenge area. Their **Recommendations** (Part V) ***are not prescriptions; community members are in the best position to make decisions about their next steps and strategies.*** Recognizing existing local efforts and the leadership of the Task Forces, these recommendations are offered, rather, as suggestions for potential next steps, and as lists of potential resources as the Task Forces make their way forward.

In the end, Bennington has established solid priorities for action, built something of a new umbrella for coordination, and set momentum toward the achievement of short and long-term goals that will lead to a great variety of successes in improving the Bennington's life and prosperity.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development is dedicated to helping Vermont communities develop their capacity to create a prosperous and sustainable future through coordination, collaboration, and the effective use of public and private resources. VCRD is prepared to support the efforts of Bennington as it moves forward and to provide follow up help to Bennington Task Forces as called upon. VCRD will also serve as an advocate for Bennington projects with appropriate agencies and organizations in Vermont. Call on us, and on Visiting Team members, when we can be of help.

VCRD deeply appreciates the time and energy of the Visiting Team and Bennington community members alike. In the end, it's all about local leadership—state, federal, non-profit and philanthropic resources follow but cannot replace that leadership: it's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease, and it's the towns with organization, direction, and consensus that capture resources to make things happen. Bennington has a tremendous leadership team in place—from town Government to the Chamber, Better Bennington Corps, schools and colleges, hospitals, service agencies, associations and businesses—the town's capacity for leadership is tremendous.

We hope that there were points in the process where Bennington participants looked around the table and saw the terrific capacity to get things done that we observed. In a democracy, we are all required to act as leaders; everyone needs to step up and contribute to their community. We were impressed all along by the leadership of the town, from Joe Krawczyk on the selectboard to Dan Monks, town planner, John Shanahan at Better Bennington, and Joane Erenhouse at the Chamber.

We are especially grateful for the leadership of Michael Brady for stepping up to serve as the chairperson of this process.

Two issues were recurrent in all the Bennington conversations that deserve mention: First the concern for youth. Everywhere we went, and in every conversation, people shared how much they cared about the young people in the town. Young people, on the other hand, complained that there wasn't enough to do and both adults and students felt that many young people were not engaged. Bennington is not alone in this challenge, but clearly this came through as a loud call for action. Young people need to be challenged and their leadership encouraged. They need to be actively invited into the work of the community, and expected to help advance key initiatives. At VCRD we believe that every working group, those created by the Community Visit along with existing groups, should be thinking about how they challenge and engage youth—and young people should be challenging themselves to make a difference. One student said, “We’re just waiting for something to happen.” That’s not good for anybody—youth need to act to develop as the leaders of the future.

Many participants said, “People from outside Bennington think much better of the town than we who live here.” Bennington certainly has its share of challenges, and any thinking person has a measure of realistic pessimism. But to the Visiting Team the impression was one of great capacity to get things done if people acted together. The ideas on the table during the process, and the priorities established can be starting points for action. People chose to develop a vision and set some monumental goals for the downtown, for facilities, and for lining up to combat poverty. Each of these platforms of action are daunting in their scale. But Bennington has the capacity, the people, the land, and location to think big and challenge itself as it did in this process.

Bennington is a town lined up to succeed—and the key ingredients of success are commitment, faith, and step-by-step collective action. The VCRD commend all who participated in the Community Visit process. Have faith in one another and you can achieve great things.



Bennington residents share their enthusiasm for suggestions from the floor at the Community Meeting on April 12th.

II. Initial List of Opportunities and Challenges

Identified by Town Forums, March 15, 2012 and High School Forums on March 8, 2012

More than 200 Bennington residents joined with VCRD staff and a 25 member Visiting Team for the Community Visit Day on March 15, filling meeting rooms in the Fire House, Masonic Temple, and the Elks Lodge. They took time from their workday and other commitments to attend forums and a pizza dinner in the truck bay of the Fire House, and to begin to work together in shaping the future of the town. The following issues emerged as initial challenges and opportunities. This list was presented back to community members at the Community Meeting on April 12th for voting and prioritization:

Build a Bennington Community Center

A Bennington Community Center built downtown could engage young and old in activities and events promoting health, supporting families, and providing needed services. Programs at the center could help young people looking for local jobs, mentorships, or applying to college. Bennington youth would like to see more sports activities, more music, and a safe and comfortable place to hang out in the downtown area. Some young people see the need for more sports facilities and envision a big activity center—like a field house or YMCA where activities could range from basketball to dances, from a pool and weight room to a sparring ring. The Community Center could include features ranging from free outdoor activities and trips for youth, to community gardening, a music room, a gym, skate park, and other athletic facilities. The Community Center could also systematically invite college students to contribute their time and energy to youth programs.

Build a New Bennington Town Green

A task force could build a plan to re-envision green space and recreation in the down town as a 21st Century town green. Developing a new downtown green will counterbalance the bypass and serve as a center-point to new marketing around walk-able Downtown Bennington, an attractive shopping and events destination. A new green could unify the downtown, enhancing shopping and dining all around it. It could be a center-point for arts, sports, farmers market, flea market, music, historical re-enactments, and town celebratory events. It could include a gazebo, pond, and other landscaping features that celebrate town heritage and revitalize downtown activities today and for the future.

Expand Bike and Walking Paths

Bennington is situated in a beautiful environment with streams and hills that make it a natural outdoor destination and gateway to Vermont. Well marked bike and walking trails could unite outdoor assets, neighborhoods, schools, and colleges in a way that would provide recreational and health benefits to residents and attract tourists and potential new residents to town. A task force could expand paths, build signage to make them a network, and plan ways to increase their use by residents and visitors.

Expand the Bennington Economic Development Investment Fund

Finding affordable start up and growth capital is crucial for small businesses and especially downtown businesses. Bennington could expand its Bennington Revolving Loan Program and rewrite the rules to make it more useful than ever as an incentive for encouraging the development of small businesses in the community. The Fund could systematically work with local banks to take risks and leverage capital into new start up enterprises and potential growth businesses.

Expand the Bennington Downtown District

Some Bennington business leaders believe that the designated downtown should be expanded to include businesses contiguous to the downtown core, especially on the north side of the designated downtown. Expanding the Downtown District could be one way to encourage business and job growth in the community.

Advance Community Communications & Positive Town Image

A task force could work to attract or develop a Bennington Front Porch Forum system, develop community Facebook and Twitter applications, identify other online tools for local use, and develop a single, universally used, on-line calendar for the full community. A centralized information hub would be a portal to all community activities; it could unite lots of efforts and build bridges between residents. The Task Force could use youth energy to advance these applications, and could also promote the development of a youth column in the Bennington Banner. It could use new and coordinated communications, and existing local media, to deliberately build a positive narrative about Bennington by developing affirmative story lines and content that delivers good press on great activities moving forward in town, celebrates youth volunteerism, business successes, and all the good work of Bennington residents.

Develop a Mayoral System of Municipal Government

Some residents believe that a mayoral system of government would build a healthy policy debate through the election cycle which would stir change and set new unifying direction for the community. They believe the current system leaves Bennington without a mandate for setting priorities and moving positive ideas forward.

Expand Dental Care

Bennington has made important steps in addressing health needs and dental needs of school-aged youth but gaps remain in dental coverage of adults and families. A task force could work together to fill this gap so that all residents have access to affordable service.

Create More Bennington Community Gardens

Bennington has empty lots and under-developed green space proximate to downtown and neighborhoods. Many residents are interested in growing some of their own food, and the fresh, local, affordable food from gardens could help family budgets. A task force could systematically expand community garden opportunities and help residents from all parts of town grow more of their own food.

Expand Downtown Housing

There is room and opportunity to expand housing across the spectrum in downtown Bennington. A Task Force could look into the upper floor development, infill, and the redevelopment of under-used properties for homes across the price range. It could advocate for the renovation of particular properties and consider the development of municipal tools that could expand home ownership, affordable housing development, senior housing, market rate housing, and other opportunities to redevelop buildings and build density downtown.

Collaborate to Address Poverty & Build a Poverty Working Group

A. **Collaborate:** Bennington non-profits that address issues connected to poverty should systematically collaborate as a team to index their services, develop one-stop access to services, guide clients through programmatic offerings, and expand communications and collaboration in supporting the progress of individuals and families.

B. **Working Group:** A Poverty Working Group should be developed to unite wealthy and low income residents, the business community, and the municipality in systematically addressing poverty issues.

C. **Fund:** The working group should build a “Bennington Community Fund” that will invest to help address poverty issues, support youth, and build positive community activities.

Develop Youth Activities Downtown

With its three colleges, downtown association, and eager youth, Bennington has a major opportunity to build a series of programs and events to attract young people into the downtown. A welcoming event for college students could help them feel that this is ‘their’ downtown. Students suggest the regular shutting down of a downtown street for block party events. Arts and craft events on the street and music on the street or in a music center downtown could attract youth and their parents. Involving youth in the design, leadership, and management of events could benefit the downtown and community for the long term.

Set Up a Get-In-Free Card for Bennington Youth

A Youth Pass to museums and events in the community could help overcome some of the frustration of youth in finding positive and affordable activities in the community. Many complain that they can’t afford to participate in events and don’t feel welcome.

Build a Regional Food System Council

A Bennington Regional Food System Task Force should be developed to advocate for local farming and the buy-local economy. This team could work to systematically evaluate needs for product aggregation, act as a food hub to capture college and hospital markets, and work in other ways to support the expansion of farm operations in the region. It could help farmers work more cooperatively to share equipment and market products. Over time, the Task Force may help farmers and food businesses grow, design a farm incubation system, expand the Farmer’s Market to year round, expand marketing for local sales and for the export of food and value-added products, build a plan for developing a food cooperative store downtown, and potentially develop a value-added food kitchen to incubate new small businesses. All these activities could promote the working landscape, develop farm business sales and expansions, and create jobs that can’t be outsourced.

Make Downtown Bennington a Destination

A task force could be developed to organize for Bennington to become a hotel/culinary/cultural tourism destination. It would lead work to re-brand and reinvigorate downtown Bennington as a regional arts destination, entrepreneurial center, and center for youth activities. This work group could evaluate opportunities to turn an empty downtown hotel into a convention center. It could also develop heritage day events, history parades and re-enactments that bridge historic sites and downtown activities. It could build arts studio space in underused downtown buildings, develop a downtown flea market, and celebrate museums and arts with downtown events matched with shopping and dining opportunities.

Develop a Bennington Time-Share Bank

A Time-Share Bank would systematically expand the exchange of volunteer labor and local goods and services by encouraging residents to donate their skills and “bank” their donation in a way that allows them to receive other donated goods or services from their neighbors.

Build a Bennington Skate Park

A number of young residents have planned and advocated for a Bennington Skate Park as a great way for young people to get exercise, build skills, and have a place to go for fun after school. A Skate Park Task Force of youth and adults could advance plans and address challenges, ultimately raising funds and overseeing the construction of a Bennington Skate Park, by itself, or as part of a larger project.

Create a Business Incubation Space

To encourage entrepreneurs and young people, and to seed its economic future, Bennington should build an incubator space for micro and start up businesses that would include shared resources and utilities, mutual support, cooperative marketing, and technical assistance from local and regional economic development organizations.

Develop a Bennington Vision Statement

Bennington needs to assert a positive and progressive story that unites residents internally and becomes the 'brand story' that the community uses to identify itself to tourists and potential residents. A common vision statement, slogan, and set of goals could serve as a unifying center-point for work to make the community a better place to live, work, and play.

Develop a Youth Jobs & Workforce Training Program

Young people in Bennington call for more internships, more 'real world' learning opportunities. Many want jobs but have a hard time finding opportunities. Some lack the basic skills to meet employers' expectations for punctuality, readiness, and performance. A coalition of employers, school system, and college leaders could come together to structure ways to better prepare youth for workforce opportunities, provide links to jobs, and help young people learn skills on-the-job.

Develop a Community Service Requirement for High School Youth

Youth energy and leadership are essential to the progress of every feature of life in Bennington. A youth Service Learning Program would build expectations for youth engagement in every key area of community work. It could teach leadership skills, and empower young people to do good things for their community while benefitting everyone. Such a program would give youth a sense that they have a voice, are important, and can take leadership in visible accomplishments that demonstrate progress.

Renew, Revitalize, or Expand the Bennington Recreation Center

Bennington could renovate or expand the Recreation Center and its offerings to attract more adults and young people to gym activities, sports, recreation and healthy outdoor activities. Some young people complain that the current center is unsafe, needs policing, and can be stigmatized. A revitalized or expanded facility that responds to community desires for sports and additional recreational activities, such as the addition of an indoor gymnasium, could make the town a more exciting and healthy place for all Bennington residents.

At the Bennington Community Meeting on April 12 2012, residents added three additional ideas for consideration of the assembled community members:

- Improve the Education System and its Public Image
- Improve Accessibility of Public Transportation
- Build an Industrial Hub and New Manufacturing with Advanced Technology

III. Bennington Priorities

Determined by Bennington residents at the VCRD Community Meeting, April 12 2012

Proving that those who live, work and raise their families in a community are best qualified to understand its needs and potential, Bennington residents whittled down a list of 22 issues through discussion, reasoned arguments and thoughtful reflection. In the end, voting with red and blue stickers, over 160 participants chose four issues that offer opportunities to enhance existing resources, and to strengthen the town through exciting new ventures. Residents concluded the April 12 meeting by signing up for one of four Task Forces in the selected areas.

Bennington residents selected four priorities for future action:

✓ Build a Bennington Community Center & Improve the Recreation Center

A Bennington Community Center downtown could engage young and old in activities and events promoting health, supporting families, and providing needed services. Programs at the center could help young people looking for local jobs, mentorships, or applying to college. Bennington youth would like to see more sports activities, more music, and a safe and comfortable place to hang out in the downtown area. Some young people see the need for more sports facilities and envision a big activity center—like a field house or YMCA where activities could range from basketball to dances, from a pool and weight room to a sparring ring. The Community Center could include features ranging from free outdoor activities and trips for youth, to community gardening, a music room, a gym, skate park, and other athletic facilities. The Community Center could also systematically invite college students to contribute their time and energy to youth programs.

Renew, Revitalize or Rebuild the Bennington Recreation Center

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✓ **Develop a Bennington Vision Statement and Advance Community Communications & Positive Town Image**

Bennington needs to assert a positive and progressive story that unites residents internally and becomes the 'brand story' that the community uses to identify itself to tourists and potential residents. A common vision statement, slogan, and set of goals could serve as a unifying center-point for work to make the community a better place to live, work, and play.

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D. Expand Dental Care: Bennington has made important steps in addressing health needs and dental needs of school-aged youth but gaps remain in dental coverage of adults and families. A task force could work together to fill this gap so that all residents have access to affordable service.

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The task force could also build a plan to re-envision green space and recreation in the downtown as a 21st Century town green. Developing a new downtown green will counterbalance the bypass and serve as a center-point to new marketing around walk-able Downtown Bennington, an attractive shopping and events destination. A new green could unify the downtown, enhancing shopping and dining all around it. It could be a center-point for arts, sports, farmers market, flea market, music, historical re-enactments, and town celebratory events. It could include a gazebo, pond, and other landscaping features that celebrate town heritage and revitalize downtown activities today and for the future.



Bennington residents narrowed down the list of Opportunities to the top 4 Priorities to move forward through a dot-voting exercise at the April 12th community meeting.

IV. Task Force Action Plans

Resource Meeting, May 16 2012

Bennington Task Forces are comprised of community members and an appointed chairperson. On Resource Day committee members worked closely with a facilitator and small resource teams to develop step-by-step action plans and to devise a list of human and financial resources to help achieve their goals. This final phase of the program marks the time when residents truly take ownership of the work, and begin the exciting process of turning ideas into action.

Task Force: ✓ Build a Bennington Community Center & Improve the Recreation Center

Chairs: **Joann Erenhouse**, Bennington Area Chamber of Commerce

Kiah Morris, Southwestern Vermont Health Care

Facilitator: **Ted Brady**, Senator Leahy's Office

Resource Leaders: **e-Jay Bishop**, Rutland Recreation & Parks

Scott McArdle, Vermont Community Foundation

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Action Steps

1. Inventory existing facilities, programs, plans, visionary plans, and potential sites.
2. Engage partners, businesses, non-profits, colleges.
3. Assess current recreation center site; what can be done there?
4. Research models of community centers, recreation centers, and skate parks.

5. Assemble sub-committees at the next meeting.
6. Determine new vs. expanded facility.

Resources

1. Vermont Community Foundation: feasibility grant, Scott McArdle, 802-388-3355, smcardle@vermontcf.org
2. Federal grant programs: USDA RD; Community Facilities; Community Development Block Grant: Cindy Blondin, Grants Specialist, 802-828-5219, cindy.blondin@state.vt.us.
3. Land & Water Conservation Fund
4. Private local donors; including real estate
5. Athletic business association
6. Preservation Trust of Vermont – historic buildings, Meg Campbell, 802-442-2005, meg@ptvermont.org
7. Vermont Land Trust, Donald Campbell, SW Regional Director: (802) 442-4915, donald@vlt.org
8. Other recreation and community centers: Essex CHiPS (<http://www.essexchips.org/>), Bradford Community Center, Upper Valley Aquatic Center (<http://uvac-swim.org/swimming/>), Stowe Swimming Hole (<http://www.theswimmingholestowe.com/>), Christain Craig @ the Edgar May Health and Recreation Center in Springfield, 802-885-2568
9. Faith-based organizations
10. Tracy, Bennington Recreation Center, (802) 442-1053

Task Force Signups

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Task Force: ✓ Develop a Bennington Vision Statement and Advance Community Communications & Positive Town Image

Chair: **Mike Harrington**

Facilitator: **Paul Costello**, *Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD)*

Resource Leaders: **Greg Brown**, *VCRD Board*
Deb Shannon, *Vermont Telecom Authority*

Bennington needs to assert a positive and progressive story that unites residents internally and becomes the 'brand story' that the community uses to identify itself to tourists and potential residents. A common vision statement, slogan, and set of goals could serve as a unifying center-point for work to make the community a better place to live, work, and play.

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Action Steps: Three Areas of Action Are Identified with the Following Steps for Each:

Vision

1. Gather together all the currently used vision statements in Bennington that are used by different groups for diverse aspects of the community's future, including: the Chamber statement, Economic Development Task Force statement, Town Plan statement, BBC statement, BCIC statement, school system statement, and others.
2. Define the current internal and external perspectives on Bennington.
3. Identify towns that have done a good job building visions, brands and logos, and gather vision statements, logos, and slogans as models.
4. Then develop a comprehensive vision statement with a logo, slogan and branded look.

Communications Systems: This Task Force is ready to serve as the group that looks at technology for community communications and connection and advance the following actions:

5. Inventory how Bennington residents are currently accessing information.
6. Develop Facebook, Twitter, Front Porch Forum and other tools that can expand Bennington community communications and networking.
7. Integrate communications more effectively with the 4 colleges and hospital by inviting a representative from each to join this committee and by consolidating all college events into Bennington calendar of events.
8. Link all community/college activities together on the internet with a common community hub schedule.

Bennington Image:

9. Build and publicize some 'testimonials' about Bennington.

10. Advocate for the school district to hire or assign a key person to lead Public Relations and tell the positive stories of good things happening with youth; support the committee working on this.
11. Once the vision, logo and slogan are developed, build new gateway signs at entrances to town. Also build welcome signs that point to the 4 colleges.
12. Develop a regular column in the Bennington Banner of positive community stories, including task forces, schools, business successes to tell the story of fall the good work moving forward in Bennington.

Resources

1. **Vermont Council on Rural Development** broadband programs for WiFi assistance, website, Front Porch Forum, Interns and potential other communications assistance. Paul Costello, 802-223-5763, pcostello@vtrural.org.
2. **USDA RD Community Grants**, Deborah Maguire, (802) 828-6011, deborah.maguire@vt.usda.gov.
3. **Bennington County Regional Commission** for help in grant writing and next step technologies. Jim Sullivan, jsullivan@bcrctvt.org, 802-442-0713 x5.
4. **VT Agency of Commerce** for potential Community Development Block Grant for planning or implementation of communications projects. Cindy Blondin, Grants Specialist, 802-828-5219, cindy.blondin@state.vt.us.
5. Faculty and especially the development staff at the colleges who may be able to help with grant assistance, including the idea of developing a comprehensive communications grant that systematically benefits both college and community.

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Task Force: ✓ Collaborate to Address Poverty & Build a Poverty Working Group

Chair: **Charles Gingo**

Facilitator: **Patricia Coates**, *Congressman Welch's Office*

Resource Leaders: **Carlen Finn**, *Voices for Vermont's Children*

Eddie Gale, *A.D. Henderson Foundation*

Doug Racine, *Vermont Agency of Human Services*

David Tucker, *Central Vermont Community Action*

- A. Collaborate: Bennington non-profits that address issues connected to poverty should systematically collaborate as a team to index their services, develop one-stop access to services, guide clients through programmatic offerings, and expand communications and collaboration in supporting the progress of individuals and families.
- B. Working Group: A Poverty Working Group should be developed to unite wealthy and low income residents, the business community, and the municipality in systematically addressing poverty issues.
- C. Fund: The working group should build a "Bennington Community Fund" that will invest to help address poverty issues, support youth, and build positive community activities.
- D. Expand Dental Care: Bennington has made important steps in addressing health needs and dental needs of school-aged youth but gaps remain in dental coverage of adults and families. A task force could work together to fill this gap so that all residents have access to affordable service..

Action Steps

COLLABORATION:

- 1) Complete a well-maintained, up-to-date, web-based resource guide of Bennington County services.
 - * identify who will organize the information
 - * identify what kinds of information to include in the guide
 - * identify who will maintain the guide and how to keep the information up-to-date
 - * identify how to get this information (guide) into the hands of people across every facet of the community
- 2) Identify potential ways/methods to streamline access points to needed services.
 - * how can we make information more accessible to more people?
 - * how can we better inform people about what services they are entitled to or eligible for?
- 3) Set up professional training around development and fund-raising for non-profit agencies.
 - * identify who can provide a day-long, free workshop about effective messaging, fund-raising, grant searching, grant writing, grant compliance. Possible resources include: Rep. Peter Welch's office, Common Good Vermont.
- 4) How to best involve people in poverty to find out their viewpoints and their needs on the above and below issues? How best to build trust (or at least break down suspicion) between service providers and those they serve? Who will take the lead?

EXPAND DENTAL CARE:

- 1) Work with existing organizations like Greater Bennington Interfaith Community Services (GBICS) and Senator Bernie Sanders' office to create a free-standing dental clinic. Who will take the lead to bring these players together?
- 2) Identify potential funding sources for the Free Dental Clinic. Who will write the grant applications?
- 3) Fund raising to support vouchers so people can access local dental practices for preventive care, intervention, and dentures. Who will lead this effort? Who will approach dentists about their interest and commitment to deliver the needed services to "walk-in" patients?
- 4) Explore continuation funding for the school dental programs. Who will take the lead?
- 5) Advocate for increased Medicaid funding for dental benefits. Who will take the lead?

BENNINGTON COMMUNITY FUND:

- 1) Identify current funds already operating in Bennington. What do they fund? How do they raise funds and from whom? How can these funds be accessed? What are "the rules" for accessing these funds? Can these funds be brought under one roof? If not, clearly identify what each fund supports: individuals? specific programs? agencies?
- 2) Can local funds like the GBICS Emergency Food & Fuel Fund be used as a model for a Bennington Community Fund? Or can GBICS be expanded to include items in addition to meeting basic human needs like food, fuel, shelter, medical care?
- 2) Are there large funds or funders with a statewide presence that are willing to establish a community presence in Bennington County? Are any willing to be the catalyst that brings other funders into the community to pool financial resources? How do we identify these? Who will take the lead to bring them together? How to identify what needs to be funded?

EDUCATION, MENTORING, TIME BANKING:

- 1) Is Time Banking (exchanging skills for credits in a community network) an option to pursue? Who will take the lead?
- 2) Education may be a key component for raising aspirations for everyone, especially for people living in poverty. How do we use educational opportunities and educational providers from pre-K through college to raise aspirations? What has to be in place to do this? Who will take the lead?
- 3) Mentoring can be a key component for helping people move out of poverty. Big Brothers Big Sisters is a known, established program focused on children and youth. Is there a way to expand this kind of program to include families or struggling adults? Who will take the lead?

SAFE, SOBER, AFFORDABLE HOUSING:

The Workgroup identify this area as a significant need but did not have time to explore ideas or expand ideas already in existence.

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Task Force: ✓ Make Downtown Bennington a Destination & Build a New Bennington Town Green

Chair: **John Shannahan**, *Better Bennington Corp.*

Facilitator: **Joss Besse**

Resource Leaders: **Mayor Christopher Louras**, *City of Rutland*
Jenny Nelson, *Senator Sanders' Office*

A task force could be developed to organize for Bennington to become a hotel/culinary/cultural tourism destination. It would lead work to re-brand and reinvigorate downtown Bennington as a regional arts destination, entrepreneurial center, and center for youth activities. This work group could evaluate opportunities to turn an empty downtown hotel into a convention center. It could also develop heritage day events, history parades and re-enactments that bridge historic sites and downtown activities. It could build arts studio space in underused downtown buildings, develop a downtown flea market, and celebrate museums and arts with downtown events matched with shopping and dining opportunities.

The task force could also build a plan to re-envision green space and recreation in the down town as a 21st Century town green. Developing a new downtown green will counterbalance the bypass and serve as a center-point to new marketing around walk-able Downtown Bennington, an attractive shopping and events destination. A new green could unify the downtown, enhancing shopping and dining all around it. It could be a center-point for arts, sports, farmers market, flea market, music, historical re-enactments, and town celebratory events. It could include a gazebo, pond, and other landscaping features that celebrate town heritage and revitalize downtown activities today and for the future.

Action Steps

1. **Green space / park / landscaping**
2. **Activities:** Music venue; Street fairs /activities; More free bikes / more racks; Student participation; Late business night – expanded hours; Historical significance
3. **Communication / Marketing:** Improved marking efforts; Comprehensive informational document; Space inventory businesses; Identify assets; Communication with community
4. **Business Improvements:** Farmer's market / coop; Occupancy increase; Late business night – expanded hours; College presence; Downtown behavior; Community policing; Signage improvements; Window works; Facades
5. **Transportation:** Improve traffic flow; Stop calling it "bypass"; Connection to pedestrian / bike path; Pedestrian experience improvements

Resources

1. Greenspace / Park: Dept of Corrections; CDC; Town; Senators; local residents/donors/ BBC; Land & Water; Assessment district; enhancement grants; affordable; downtown transportation fund; Hendersen Fund
2. Activities: selectboard; VAE, Oldcastle, Turning Point; Business owners; Chamber of Commerce; BBC
3. Communication/marketing/historical significance: Bennington Banner; CAT TV; Retailers; RDC's

4. Business Improvements: BBC, Business owners, Chamber of Commerce; landlords; SBDC, realtors; town office, banks
5. Transportation: Transportation grants; House/Senate; department of health, hospital, colleges, town, Green Mountain Transportation; enhancement grants; bikeped coalition; taxi.

Task Force Signups

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V. Resource Team Recommendations

Resource Team members represent a wide array of professionals from across the state, and agree to serve as partners and advisors to the Bennington Task Forces. Their recommendations below encompass their experience, past success, and consideration of the community's unique assets and needs. It is hoped that community members will turn frequently to these pages for concrete ideas, resources and support. Resource Team members are eager to support the Task Forces as they begin their work.

✓ Build a Bennington Community Center & Improve the Recreation Center

POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS:

The Task Force should communicate with hospital CEO Thomas Dee and their management team to encourage them to get behind this. They should see it as a community health priority and make it their priority. The Task Force should ask the hospital to establish a representative on the committee.

The Task Force should seek corporate sponsorship for a **skate park** (Burton, Vermont Country Store, and others) and engage youth from the beginning by recruiting at least two youth members. The group could also take a field trip together to Randolph, Bristol, and Montpelier where there are successful models for skate parks. Other great skate parks can be seen on the Burlington waterfront, at the Talent Skate Park in Essex, and at the skate park at the Mountain School in Winhall.

Look at different models of **Youth Centers**. Addison County has three distinct models: a boys and girls club, a recreation department based model – The HUB, and an independent nonprofit called Addison Central Teens. Each has their strengths and their challenges –perhaps Bennington will create the perfect hybrid! The team could also visit successful or developing Community/Rec Centers in Winooski, the North End of Burlington (Miller Center), St. Albans (Collins-Perley) and Springfield.

If successfully done, the Task Force will create a culture of community ownership of the community center. It is important to make it feel like a neighborly not just a rule-bound municipal institution. Encourage groups to use it for potlucks, and social events, not just official social service meetings. Try to schedule lots of open times where all community members are welcome to drop in (vs. all fee-based structured events).

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THE COMMUNITY CENTER AND RECREATION CENTER TASK FORCE:

The Task Force should work with the new soccer school and facility, Bo Vuchovich and Mark Benson of VT Voltage and intend to include lots of programs for parents and kids in their redevelopment of the Catamount School. There could probably be room for a skate park in the school yard. Mark and Bo could be extremely useful on the task force and seem open to helping advance the mission of this group by their private sector activity. They are encouraging the community to think of ways their project could serve a great variety of community social needs and athletic ends.

USDA Rural Development offers Community Facilities Loans and Grants – contact Andrea Ansevin-Allen (802) 257-7878 ext 113 [Portions of Bennington are eligible for a 35 percent grant of total project cost based on median income],

Cindy Logan, formerly a school board member and parks committee member in Winhall, could share the story of how they moved these issues ahead; her email is: info@redfoxinn.com.

Vermont Community Development Program (Community Development Block Grant Program) could be a source for funding if a platform for redeveloping a building comes forward.

The Vermont Children's Trust (out of the Agency of Human Services—802- 241-2220), the Permanent Fund (out of the VT Community Foundation—802- 388-3355), and the A.D. Henderson Foundation (Eddie Gale, at 802- 635-9466) could be important sources of support.

The HUB – Bristol Vermont is a youth center that has a very good skate park. Jim Lockridge is their ED and he can be reached at thehub@gmavt.net or 802- 453-3678.

Would local higher educational institutions have available facilities and the willingness to help? The Task Force could survey their interest and invite representatives to join its efforts.

✓ Develop a Bennington Vision Statement and Advance Community Communications & Positive Town Image

POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS:

Building a vision

Carry out a community visioning process – what should Bennington be like, what should be the salient features of the town in say 2030, when kids born today are 18 and deciding if they want to build a life in Bennington. What values should come to mind when one thinks of Bennington?

From community vision comes the foundation for rallying and focusing community volunteer energy, for building self-image and ultimately for branding and a marketing campaign.

Ask youth group organizers to engage kids to formulate a mission/vision for an ongoing youth and residents Facebook campaign.

Selectboard leadership is critical to give project credibility throughout the community, and to give clout for the Task Force to solicit funding, in-kind support, and to have external legitimacy. Task Force membership should represent a broad spectrum of the community; business, colleges, non-profit organizations, seniors, youth, schools, low income folks, residents of the villages, the downtown area. Make deliberate invitations to leaders to cover the bases. It is great that municipal leadership is engaged in chairing and staffing the effort.

Public participation should be frequent and meaningful, including project design, identification of community values, definition of alternate visions and selection of final vision statement. As discussed elsewhere in this report, all version of public outreach, electronic, print and personal, should be used to solicit public input and to report to the public on project progress. Special note should be taken of the current identity issues related to the existing political subdivisions in the Town, and specific steps taken to forge a shared vision that can bridge gaps.

The Task Force should review all earlier community-wide planning or visioning projects done in the past for inspiration and ideas, and as source for community traditions that can help define Bennington and what makes it special. The committee product should be a draft vision statement and proposal describing route

to implementation program to achieve vision. Ultimately this should include a description of annual assessment process to measure progress on implementation of action steps and to celebrate successes.

Building communications tools

Engage colleges to help and local high school students interested in tech ed/computers to join the committee and systematically help get online presence on Facebook, Twitter and other social networks. Partner with a hip local company that already has a social media campaign to expand community communications.

Clearly, Bennington needs an on-line public forum that can help everyone share information. Front Porch Forum is Vermont's leading structure for this. Front Porch Forum is eager to come to Bennington and the community could benefit in similar ways that other Vermont towns currently do. To do this, they need (1) sponsors to cover a one-time start-up fee and (2) a group of local advocates to bring energy to their FPF once it's up and running. Bennington could either make the investment to bring FPF to town or could write a small grant to fund it. Michael Wood Lewis of Front Porch Forum can be reached at 802-540-0069.

Front Porch Forum also has a widget calendar that can record events posted in the forum but could be embedded in all community websites to build an integrated on-line calendar. This could be invaluable to Bennington communications.

Building a positive messages about Bennington

One way to change the local dialogue is to identify "key communicators" (not necessarily elected officials or business owners or directors of non-profits). These are people who talk a lot, who are recognized as knowing "what's going on." Enlist their help as ambassadors. Host gatherings with these folks that feature surprising and positive features of the community. Encourage them to talk, and to write commentaries and letters to the paper. Trust that they will talk to their friends and neighbors about what they've heard. Attitudes will begin to change in an organic way.

At some point in this process Bennington should consider hiring a public relations firm on retainer and seeking grants to fund it initially. The consultant could help the community develop a motto and unifying logo if needed. There may be a local PR, graphic design and/or marketing company who would volunteer to help.

Have a local competition for stories and a slogan. Use main street and empty windows to share the stories, get short stories everywhere you can in surprising ways – paper place mats at the diner, hanging off the gas tanks so folks have something to read while pumping gas, in the town water bills, on grocery bags.

Formalize your committee, call it something fizzy like Bennington Busts Out; invite adults and students, and do all the work with volunteers such as the ones who have already stepped forward.

Ask the Banner to participate with regular stories about this committee's progress, and work to take turns or mutually contribute to a monthly column that praises people who are doing good things in business, the arts, schools, and throughout the community. Students can develop Facebook and Twitter messages in part from these community stories.

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THE VISION, COMMUNICATIONS, AND POSITIVE IMAGE TASK FORCE:

Look at school activities and contests offered by Digital Wish and the many ways they creatively engage kids in school-to-work programs then publicize on Facebook & Front Porch Forum.

Invite afterschool groups to activities, games, performances and fundraisers on FPF. Let students know they might find a great job gardening or baby-sitting.

The towns of Starksboro, Bristol and City of Vergennes have all adopted Front Porch Forum; you could contact folks there to see how it is best implemented and used.

Prevail on the Oldcastle Theatre to use space in their new building for meetings. They need a connection to the community that could come from this effort.

With the leadership of the task force and willing presenters on the Best of Bennington in the press and on line, there will be momentum.

The Vermont Community Foundation may be able to fund a grant application to bring Front Porch Forum to Bennington. Contact Scott McArdle at 802-388-3355. To build a Bennington Front Porch Forum contact Michael Wood-Lewis, FPF CEO and Co-Founder, 802-540-0069 x3, michael@frontporchforum.com.

USDA Rural Business Enterprise Grants or Rural Business Opportunity Grants could be accessed for branding that helps local businesses– contact Andrea Ansevin-Allen (802) 257-7878 ext 113.

Bennington might access a Municipal Planning Grant from the Department of Housing and Community Affairs at 802-828-5204.

There may be resources from the local business community including the Chamber of Commerce and especially banks and other financial institutions, through challenge or matching grant programs.

Grant(s) from other foundations related to community development, the arts, or historic preservation could be obtained.

The Bennington County Regional Commission should be invited to partner in this effort and might be able to lend some staffing or technical assistance. Jim Sullivan is their director at 375-2576.

✓ Collaborate to Address Poverty & Build a Poverty Working Group

POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS:

Talk to the Vermont Community Foundation about their possible plans to hire a southern VT staffer who could potentially take the development of a Bennington Community Fund on as a project. Their assistance in building and managing such a fund could be indispensable. Contact Scott McArdle at 388-3355.

Create a “leave a legacy” planned giving campaign to give back to Bennington in wills and estate plans and develop this as a community endowment fund.

Rebuild the United Way organization in the region.

Include employers, schools and transportation in the collaboration – often they hold the key to interesting solutions like revamping the bus schedule and shift schedules to align for low and moderate income workers or for child care.

Working group should articulate its mission at town gatherings then make dissemination of the mission of ameliorating poverty personal where possible. Here are some potential ways how:

- 1) Handpick 2-3 Bennington community representatives (not from a non-profit) to promote the mission as a part of their daily interactions.
- 2) Each Task Force member should add a factoid line to personal email signature about what is changing in Bennington.
- 3) Daily, mention one working group activity to a colleague AND ask them to share it with somebody else.

Use social media including Front Porch Forum to promote a positive vocabulary and tone around issues of poverty that allow more open communication between various community organizations – like the gardening club and hunger groups.

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THE POVERTY TASK FORCE

Utilize VT 2-1-1 a program of United Ways of VT for organizational/programmatic database.

Look into CASH coalition in Burlington and how they've done their work.

The Vermont Community Foundation and United Way can be basic supporters.

✓ Make Downtown Bennington a Destination & Build a New Bennington Town Green

POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS:

Build on the years of work that the downtown organization has already accomplished. Pick up on the well thought out strategies that have been devised over a period of time. Choose some of the more easily accomplished small, yet visible projects, to rekindle pride and momentum. Use the truck by-pass as an opportunity to focus on the downtown and what it can be now that the trucks will not be rumbling through. Cafes, vendors, entertainment and exhibits can be revenue raisers as well as attractors. There are many models to choose from.

This Task Force will need to be thinking in a year-to-year pattern to accomplish its major long-term goals.

One way to start would be an assessment of available space and identification of potential sources of funding, public and private. It will be important to connect directly to zoning and planning, and ensure that the responsible town officials or staff members participate in the Task Force.

Both the Better Middlebury Partnership and Bristol Downtown Partnership have done a good job of developing unique events with big draws from both inside and outside the county – they work with the chamber of commerce to develop get-away packages with local lodging and restaurants. Several

thousand folks have attended the Middlebury Chili Fest – many from communities outside Addison County and many as repeat visitors to the event.

The HUB in Bristol has hosted a weekend music festival working with Big Heavy World – a successful event drawing bands and youth in a fun (and loud) and safe event.

The Rutland Creative Economy committee (chaired by Paul Gallo) has built a downtown committee chaired by Mark Foley Jr. which started and manages their “Friday Night Live” series and is doing redevelopment on the Center St Alley—and maybe someday to make a pedestrian mall in the center of Rutland City. Members of the Bennington committee might want to meet with the Rutland Creative Economy initiative to ask about how they have found resources and starting points for these activities and for the new bike/walking path led by e-Jay Bishop.

Start with the goal of making downtown Bennington a destination for LOCALS and people from nearby towns. This will lead to people from further afield wanting to visit.

Then ENGAGE TOURISTS!

The way to get to their attention is to have an online presence. Make sure that every single eating venue is listed on Urban Spoon (www.urbanspoon.com) AND that 2-3 friends write a review.

Ask tourists what THEY would like to see more of in Bennington.

Where are the successful revenue streams for Bennington? Follow that trail. Who are the exceptions to the lagging economy and what do they do that can be modified to apply to entertainment, outdoor events, agriculture, the arts community?

Determine what risks have paid off.

What risks are community members willing to take – in terms of doing business in new ways – both non-profit and for-profit?

Offer downtown wi-fi that is sponsored through local business advertising on a town portal page.

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THE DOWNTOWN DESTINATION AND TOWN GREEN TASK FORCE:

City officials, representatives from the private sector, e.g. BCIC, Chamber, other business community folks and summer residents who have a vested interest in the success of this venture.

The Vermont Council on Rural Development is putting together an EDA grant to try to help downtowns build Wi-Fi zones, integrated websites, Front Porch Forum, etc. Call 802-223-6091 to be on the list of interested communities.

Utilize the state’s downtown association and successful downtown managers as resources. They love to share best practices and time to build sustainable communities which must include vital downtowns.

USDA Rural Business Enterprise Grants, Rural Business Opportunity Grants – contact Andrea Ansevin-Allen (802) 257-7878 ext 113.

Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation – Land and Water Conservation Fund: competitive grant program of up to 50 percent of a project cost on parks and greenways. Call 802-241-3670.

VI. Town Forum Notes

Compiled from focus group discussions held with over 300 Bennington residents and the VCRD Visiting Team on March 15, 2012

Although the prioritization work of the Community Visit Program requires a town to decide what is most important as it moves forward with Task Forces, nothing is lost in the process from the long list of concerns and ideas expressed in early community focus sessions. Many interesting and diverse thoughts are represented here, and are presented as a reminder of issues explored, and a possible foundation for future projects.

Poverty

Resource Team: Steve Dale (facilitator), Margaret McCoy (scribe), Phil Petty, Carlen Finn, Eddie Gale, Scott McArdle, Kate McGowan, Doug Racine

What are the Assets and Challenges in this Area?

- Bennington has one of the highest poverty rates in the state. Poverty rate in Vermont is 11%. In Bennington it's 15%.
- We're getting too used to poverty here. People are used to seeing people sleeping under the bridges and just accept it.
- People can't afford internet access, so they can't access online services, update their resumes, or search for jobs.
- Others say there isn't any poverty – it's invisible and they prefer it remain invisible. It's more comfortable for them that way. Also, ethnic minority populations prefer to remain less visible out of fear of being further marginalized.
- Steering committee had discussion as to whether even include poverty as a topic today.
- Collaboration is an asset
- Need to build on collaboration in this community to help.
- Collaboration sometimes missing is that we can't get to large sectors of our population in terms of info and knowledge base and a big barrier over time is the issue of homelessness and housing across the spectrum – homelessness, adequate housing, cost of housing
- Old food shelf in town is an asset – anyone is welcome there. You fill out a form that lists the number in your family. The statistics show a huge increase of people coming in recent years: 290 (2008), 308 (2009), 333 (2010), 361 (2011), 597 (2012) individuals. Food disappears quickly.
- Kitchen cupboard has been open close to a year. More than 1,000 families partake (3-4 per family) – about 25% of the population.
- Teen pregnancy and homelessness are two of the big challenges.
- Lots of people live paycheck to paycheck. A small thing can upset the personal economics of the household, an illness, car repair, etc. These days it's reaching further into the population, not just the most impoverished. It's pushing many more people over the edge.
- Transportation, addictions, mental health are barriers.
- Mental health support is sorely needed. The Agency is stressed and the demand is higher than they can meet. There's a high turnover rate.
- 2 of the 3 elementary schools are running 80% free and reduced lunch rate. Those kids end up having trauma and an increase in homelessness including staying with relatives or in motels.
- In some families, students that are working to save for college have to give their money to their families for basic needs instead.
- Brain development is altered in a child of generational poverty. Their brain is hardwired differently.
- We need to define causes of poverty before can find a solution.
- Parent of 3 children with 2 on the spectrum was working 2 jobs because of increase in costs of living, gas prices, food, etc. But had to leave jobs because it wasn't worth it with cost of child care and the challenges of keeping the family together due to the stress on the marriage with 2 diagnosed kids. They are now a 1 income family. There's too much demand to meet all the needs. They do with less, and go to the food shelf and agencies for assistance. She finds it really difficult to wade through all the paperwork for all the different services, it's a full-time job in and of itself.
- Cost of fuel oil is too high. Federal cutback was harsh.
- Transportation is a challenge. Green Mountain Transport isn't as frequent as would be beneficial.
- Dental care isn't included in health coverage. Kids have Dr. Dinosaur option, but adults have no options. Dentists aren't taking new patients or don't except Medicaid.
- Not every child has Dr. Dinosaur. Some don't have insurance.
- Bennington free clinic opened 3 years ago. 95% of the people we see have depression, anxiety or both.
- Lack of dental care has been in crisis for a number of years. It impacts health in general. It's an important preventative health issue to think about.
- A challenge is the state budget cuts and federal cuts in programs designed to serve people in need. We won't ever have a pill to solve the issue.
- In this room, 20% raised their hand as non-profit organization representatives. That is both an asset and a challenge. We need to ask the people in poverty what they need. How many in this room actually live in poverty? How do we get their voices and ideas and move those issues? Political leaders have

lost their way about what is important and necessary to their wellbeing.

- We have lots of resources and assets for those at the very lowest poverty level. Housing authority has subsidized rents for lowest income. But changes need to happen in order to

serve the people we're dealing with on a daily basis. Need to serve the people it was intended to serve and help. There are 365 homeless in Bennington County.

- This is the richest country in the world and we shouldn't have homelessness and people who are hungry.

Opportunities: What Should Be Done?

- We could create more community gardens. There are a lot of empty lots here. We need to create a food supply. Getting people who are living in the dire circumstances involved and invested in creating their own food is a big step.
- The Tutorial Center runs a community garden. We employ income eligible youth.
- Upper Ground is being cut so kids will have nowhere to go. Start a community center for families and teens to teach them how to do things on their own. Could tie in with community garden. Also teach them how to apply for college, etc.
- Need for mentors to guide them in making decisions and finding agencies.
- Mentoring needed for kids around how to take care of their money in this complex economic time. People are spending ½ month's pay on rent and they don't know how to manage money. The education system needs to step up.
- Adjust the Housing Authority rules so people are on a continuum.
- We need more collaboration amongst agencies in support of one family. It's isolating to live in a low income environment and it's hard to navigate which agency offers what services. I don't see a collaboration of organizations referring people to the proper agencies for help. People have to figure it out on their own which is hard.
- Create an index that describes agencies, organizations, initiatives, and their goals and visions, etc. Various organizations are working for the same thing but they aren't aware that a similar thing exists.
- Work through the public schools to address poverty issues. Home Economics classes at the high school just got cut. Let's bring them back.
- Reduction in human services employees isn't working well for some. Now people go to Bennington/Rutland Opportunity Council (BROC). It's doubled or tripled the amount of time it takes to get assistance and emergency housing.
- We need a sustained focus on poverty with the service providers and people of wealth. Ten years ago there was a community-wide training around poverty. There was a huge movement to do something but nothing happened.
- We need to involve the business community and make sure people are being paid properly. Low wages in the workforce contribute to poverty.
- Need to remove the legal barriers to getting help for health care and dental care. Vermont is one state that is illegal for a doctor or dentist to cross the state line to render compassionate care.
- One man said he gives back to his community to pay for services he gets by doing things for others – paying it forward.
- Start a fund that could support people that need dental care or other services, etc. There are wealthy people in our community. We can't expect state or federal funds will be available. There needs to be a redistribution of wealth and communities taking care of each other.
- Provide help for families in tracking their services so they don't lose benefits. It's hard for them to keep up with deadlines for reapplying with all the different services with different deadlines, etc.
- Make just one application for state services. It takes an enormous amount of time for people to keep up with paperwork.
- Establish a better information system. Is there a better way to utilize our media? We are small comparatively speaking.
- Offer a place on state tax form to allow people to contribute to Bennington.
- Focus on creating jobs in Bennington.
- Long-term solution has to come from the business community. The business community needs to embrace idea of helping people. Our program gives people 6-weeks of training and we cover liability and workers comp for businesses that hire them. And even with that, it's hard to find businesses that will open their doors to this free help.
- We don't have adequate local food sources. It would be nice to support local farming organizations and create a local economy.
- An idea that brings students and seniors together. Students are entering schools that aren't ready. Older people are not set with social security and that can bring on depression and anxiety. The older people of the community have a lot to give. Before they close themselves off from the community, we could implement a program like 'rocking chairs and books' where older people read to babies and toddlers who need that extra stimulation. Some older people want to be heard and just want someone to talk to. Babies need to hear and be talked to. Matching them together would benefit both.
- We need to show people on welfare how to get off of welfare.
- Look for ideas for solutions from other communities that have taken on poverty.
- Is there information from the Statewide Forum on Poverty we can use locally? Look at the report from the forum at the statehouse on poverty that was held a while ago.
- Look at the apprentice program through the Department of Labor and other benefits from the state. Electrical, plumbing.
- Coordinate with RSVP, the local senior volunteer center.
- Implement a time-bank where people offer a skill at a certain number of hours and someone else does something back for you. Look at other communities that are doing that.

- Give better support to individuals who are trying to be employed.
- Overhead funding for non-profits that offer help is challenging. In this day and age, we have to be creative and find a collaborative model. Large church buildings can be used in service to issues that affect community and a place for collaboration between groups offering services. Like what we're doing at the First Baptist Church. They never covered this in divinity school but they are now.
- Make sure that there's not legislation that prevents that from happening.
- Do an asset mapping exercise.
- Vermont Community Foundation (VCF) should have an outpost here. We're not getting money from the state or feds to deal with these issues. VCF's physical presence and local staff could help put their money where our mouth and would be trendsetting.
- Engagement by business community, faith-based, service organizations, etc. to make a difference one person at a time.
- Staff in place through USC, or some other organization, that deals with people with mental health issues that fall through the cracks. As well as staff to help families that have lost housing repeatedly be better prepared to maintain their home.
- Interfaith Council last June came with a vision for Bennington with Michael Keane. Should look at that conversation in the context of this conversation.
- Market the town to have more businesses come here. Can we have a subcommittee to blend everything we're hearing with a longer range vision to benefit the whole community.
- Certain levels of skills are needed for certain jobs. We need to train or prepare people for those jobs.
- The Economic Development Task Forces is meeting regularly on economic development issues. Joint committee knows they have to be more intentional about being heard from folks in Montpelier.
- A strong economic foundation and a town with a good self image is where people take care of their neighbors. Now middle class families are struggling and they can't help others. Selectboard is left with bills trying to decide what they can cut. How to take little industries that make up the fabric of Bennington; i.e., composite business cluster.

Reflections of the Community Visit Team

- The program at First Baptist is a state and national leader on how non-profits can collaborate. They need to collaborate in this economy and in some cases merge. There is a lot of that going on in this community. The Vermont Community Foundation is trying to move to a regional staffing model. We're working on having a presence in Bennington – Bennington is at the top of the list.
- The number of people at this forum is impressive. There are a lot of people who care about each other and their neighbors which is a great asset in this community. Heard a lot of emphasis on the economy and having decent jobs. Folks on assistance programs want to work. The strength of the faith-based community in Bennington is powerful. Government can't do all if it. You could look to the faith-based community to help. Look to the schools and role of schools in working with children in poverty. Start with kids to make sure they get good opportunities.
- Bennington is not alone with these issues. There are a lot of communities struggling with same questions and similar assets. There seem to be gaps in knowledge between service agencies. Also, the resources aren't there so it will take creative thinking and bending some rules along the way. We can't wait – this conversation has been going on for 35 years. That's a lot of waiting. How do we stop waiting and identify what we really want to do and create a greater will that is broad. Need to rally the will in the community.
- A tremendous amount of creative and hard work goes into just surviving in poverty. Young children's brains are wired depending on their environment. It's important to encourage good care for young children. There is a funding stream through VT Dept of Education but it has a 2 year wait. Currently, there is a grant in the works with the Henderson Foundation for Bennington where 100 kids would be served by supporting the existing child care network to do that work.
- When one measures level of poverty here it's higher than the Vermont average. What are the specific causes in your community that leads to that difference? Look at how you can focus the tremendous assets here and utilize those assets to get to the cause.
- Global theme of a real understanding that it takes a community to work together to adjust this. But there is a role of Govt to address and support the communities doing the work together. So hard to do the work that needs to be done now, but stay on top and work together as a state on the bigger issues. Harder and overwhelming at times, but remember you are not alone, this is going on around the state and think about how you can push back a little with our government on some of the big issues. It will eventually impact this community.

Youth

Resource Team: Doug Racine (facilitator), Phil Petty (scribe), Steve Dale, Carlen Finn, Eddie Gale, Scott McArdle, Margaret McCoy, Kate McGowan

What are the Assets and Challenges in this Area?

- Bennington youth have an image problem out in the community (adult speaking). There is not anything for them to do.
- The community has not always supported youth programs.
- “Teens for Change” group creates free events – 4 events in the last year. Events are cool when youth come up with the ideas. Videos and especially dances have a large turnout. Teens for Change is giving back to the community by washing windows of stores that have supported their efforts.
- Bennington has excellent schools, contrary to popular opinion.
- The Center for Restorative Justice opens their doors one day a week for teens.
- Young person says “they need free events rather than having to pay to do things all the time.”
- Adults have to make time for young people in their community. Adults must spend time with kids or have no one to blame but themselves.
- Need a youth center for Bennington.
- Need a skate park.
- More outdoor activities needed....hunting, fishing, etc., other outdoor recreation opportunities are available, too, in and around Bennington.
- Upward Bound will no longer operate after June. A couple of current employees are looking to create a community center in Bennington. They asked for input – help and ideas for what to offer.
- There are lots of youth organizations in Bennington. Need to focus their energy. Funding is also a big problem.
- There are many good teachers in Bennington’s schools. They spend time with students after school hours....Molly Stark School and the Mosaic program are examples.
- A former student, now in college, worries about 8pm-11pm, not so much about what happens in school. There is not a lot to do outside of school.
- For example, access to skis is difficult in today’s economy because they are so expensive.
- The Bennington Rec Center could be used more effectively. There are underutilized rooms left vacant and things that are out of order.
- There is a large drinking and drug problem in Bennington.
- Communication and collaboration are major issues of concern.
- Sports are popular here. There should be more organized programs for different levels of participation, not just school or varsity sports.
- Children are left alone because parents are so stressed, and working hard to survive day to day.
- There is not enough funding to support needed programs. Community needs to get more creative with acquiring resources.
- There are a lot of empty rooms in the community. These should be matched with people who want to volunteer. Need to communicate this better to the town.
- There is not adequate infrastructure to sustain youth programs. Start-ups get funded but cannot be sustained over the long term due to lack of ongoing resources. Some programs have moved into the school. There are not enough resources to fund all of the programs that are wanted and needed.
- A large number of kids in Bennington are in trouble and experiencing “trauma.”
- Youth in Bennington need to take control of what is happening. We should empower kids in high school to do more in their community.
- Youth need to feel that they are worthwhile. Teens for Change started the program for at-risk youth. They feel good about themselves and are reaching out to others.
- It is essential that adults connect to children. Every child needs this connection and support from adults.
- Kids need to be doing things that make them feel important. Poor kids in this town are not getting this attention.
- Mentoring of at risk kids has stopped. Used to be run by Quantum / Bennington College and they couldn’t sustain it so the program moved to the school. But no one is managing it.
- Where one wants to go in life is important to teens (youth speaking). Many teens do not know what direction their lives are headed.
- There is a strong desire among youth to be involved. But they fill voids in their lives with drugs and alcohol and by hanging out (teacher speaking).
- A stronger sense of community and collaboration are needed.

What are the Opportunities: What can be done?

- Have a weekly column in the newspaper, a public forum available for youth in the Bennington Banner.
- Service learning projects should be available for students – volunteering, and allowing kids to solve problems.
- Bennington should take on one youth challenge at a time. Seek more collaboration to see it through.
- Start a leadership group for any young person in Bennington. The program will need adult volunteers.
- Add-on to the Rec Center to create a Youth Center or Community Center.
- The Colleges and college students should be more involved in the community.
- Catamount Access TV is available for youth to make movies and produce programs.

- The Vermont Voltage recently purchased Catamount Elementary School to create an indoor soccer facility. Voltage staff person offered to help youth in the community.
- Very important to let kids create the ideas.
- Activities for special needs students are needed.
- Need more adult mentors.
- People need to talk to youth when they are younger. Start talking in elementary school.
- Working together, teen to teen, teen to adult - need people to be leaders but also need to listen to one another.
- Focus on what is most important first, pool resources together.
- Health of children is very concerning. Outdoor activities are important for maintaining good health. Community gardening is an idea.
- The Tutorial Center has community gardening programs. They provide food to several institutions.
- Lots of people wish to participate in sports if organized programs were more available.
- Teens could mentor younger children. If children are not reached before middle school, it is too late.
- Conservatory (?) underutilized ... (I think speaker was referring to conservation areas around town). Suggested there could be more outdoor programs.
- Project Graduation where at risk students are paired with mentors (like big brother, big sister programs) is suggested. Program like this available in North Adams, MA.
- Partnering with the schools is important...Mosaic program has been very valuable.
- Use the Internet to communicate more, not just the traditional newspaper.
- Use schools as community buildings from 4 pm to 10 pm, especially because there are not enough available resources to build dedicated spaces.
- There is a problem with connecting volunteers to specific organizations. Should use the Internet as a tool for making these connections.
- Calendar of community events suggested.
- Need to have a facebook page, twitter account to connect with youth today – use social media.
- Bennington Banner great resource in this community...should make better use of it.

Reflections of the Visiting Team

- Youth as assets should be held on to. The discussion has been positive, remarkably so.
- Inter-generational connections are very important. It demonstrates how community cares about one another.
- Empowering kids by involving kids is crucial.
- Not enough philanthropy out there to support all these programs
- Dream Program...opportunity for Bennington if it is not currently active in town.
- Lots of assets, but lack of coordination mentioned several times. Maybe FPF could help.
- Adult to child mentoring programs are important
- Any reason why the MAU wrestling program is so successful? Can that success be replicated for other programs impacting youth in Bennington?
- Is the 2-1-1 system being used in Bennington? Could be a valuable tool.
- Noted some things that have not been said – substances, healthy choices, jobs and job readiness, alternative education. Do kids have a vision for the future; is there a community wide celebration of youth in Bennington?
- Impressive list of ideas, opportunities. Noted that mentoring is critical. Problems are all about relationships. Need to communicate with youth in the same ways that kids communicate with one another.

Education

Resource Team: Doug Racine (facilitator), Phil Petty (scribe), Steve Dale, Carlen Finn, Eddie Gale, Scott McArdle, Margaret McCoy, Kate McGowan

What are the Assets and Challenges in this Area?

- Students, faculty, staff are remarkable people working with remarkable children.
- Partnering with the Vermont State Colleges (VSC) especially with the Vermont Technical College (VTC) is an old idea that should be looked at again. The old idea was to create a new model for how the Career Development Center (CDC), VTC, and CCV work together. Create a year 13, year 14 experience, especially for technical education. Bring this idea forward to today as it still seems like a good idea.
- There is incredible support from the school board for early childhood services. Public pre-K services for 100 children is being provided.
- There is strong research on how important age 3/grade 3 education is. There needs to be more attention given to children in this age group.
- The dropout rate in Bennington is high, although the graduation rate has gotten better in the last 8 years. Truancy in Bennington schools is a problem. The State needs to change truancy laws so schools can better enforce truancy rules.
- It's the parents that let students' dropout, not the schools!
- The definition of a dropout is a problem. Example - if individual did not graduate with their cohorts to take a year off to do something else, they are considered a dropout. Other definitions are also problematic - school schedule, school year.
- We do not support students or parents enough.

- English teacher speaking - “blockages and barriers come from poverty” The Bennington community works together well.
- Tutorial Center has been in existence for 38 years. The public schools are doing the very best they can. The community is very fortunate to have alternative education opportunities.
- Vermont High School Completion Program was mentioned. Students earn high school credits on their own schedule, like at the Tutorial Center, not on a traditional school schedule that doesn’t work well for many students.
- The model for education needs to change, but that requires solving lots of new problems that arise from employing these new models.
- Bennington schools / community often do think outside the box in education. Speaker worries about the volume of kids that need help. A lot of the problem is lack of resources.
- Every child needs something a little bit different.
- A huge obstacle to education is poverty. Students come to school hungry. The level of depression and anxiety is huge. Educators have so many obstacles to overcome before they can educate.
- Amazing how many kids come to school before classes begin looking for breakfast or something to do.
- Need to work with families early on, including parents.
- Teachers need community to help them do their job effectively.
- Incredible number of high school students are not living with their parents. They were kicked out of the house. Problem needs to be addressed.
- Parents have to work 3-11, 11-7 never see their kids.
- Parent who home schooled “wanted to be part of her child’s education.” Then got sick and sent her daughter to a Christian school. She is also a foster parent. She is very supportive of teachers in the public schools.
- Schools do not do a good job of marketing themselves (education and education programs, including alternatives).
- Comment on how much educators have to act as a parent. Teachers often complain about that.
- The Catholic school is a wonderful asset to Bennington.
- Highland Hall School is another alternative.
- Southshire School is another alternative.
- SOS program where adults connect with students at their school.

Opportunities: What Should Be Done?

- Teachers should use websites to communicate with parents about homework, grades, events, and curriculum (but many parents do not have computers).
- Real culture of poverty that has existed in Bennington for a long time. Bennington should develop a community fund to help solve some of these issues.
- Use mentoring concept in education more. It will make a big difference.
- School choice is important. There are different recipes for educating.
- Relationships with teachers, serving as mentors, is a very important part of education.
- The value of mentoring is that it gives students aspirations.
- Schools should look at alternative time frames to better match student and parent needs.
- We need to mentor families, not just individuals or just the kids.
- The educational system needs to help students to hope and dream. Ruby Payne’s work.
- School does not prepare students to deal with other types of schedules that they will experience in life. Maybe education shouldn’t be packaged during only 8-3 timeframe.
- There are many student successes that are not marketed well. We need to showcase them more.
- There is an image problem with the Bennington schools.
- Bennington recently passed their school budget. “Thank-you.”
- Schools need to better communicate what is happening in schools, programs, etc. so people know that the community is working hard to educate their youth.
- Leverage school choice as a collaborative effort, not a competitive effort.
- There is not sufficient infrastructure to meet all students’ needs. How can we create the infrastructure that is needed?
- Use school as a community center from 4-10 pm each day. Maybe use the middle school for this purpose.
- Bennington educational system is not organized well enough to meet educational needs – 7 school boards, not just one. They emphasize local rather than regional perspectives. Need to rethink governance to better address educational needs of all students across all communities most effectively and most efficiently.
- Southern Vermont College spokesperson – “everyone’s job to help in education – teachers, students, parents, employers.” Should better support students coming back to Bennington.

Reflections of the Community Visit Team

- No connections with employment mentioned in this discussion.
- Noted the very positive remarks about Bennington’s education system from the audience.
- Chittenden county program cut their truancy in half (might be model for Bennington).
- Neighbors Keepers is a program about family mentoring (might also be a good fit for Bennington).

Downtown

Resource Team: Paul Costello (*facilitator*), Scott Humphrey (*scribe*), Ted Brady, Paul Bruhn, Helen Labun Jordan, Molly Lambert, Jenny Nelson, Steve Patterson, Ruth Wallman

What are the Assets and Challenges in this Area?

- I remember when it was much worse in 80s, vacancies, rundown buildings. Today we have lights, sidewalks, benches, much better now.
- Could use more businesses.
- As a visitor – parking is an issue.
- We're in a good strategic statewide location.
- Good schools, museums, tourist attractions: should be marketing more effectively.
- Great Town Plan has helped downtown.
- Local entrepreneur was brought by microloan from BBC (Better Bennington Corporation): they had shopping list, and wanted a bakery.
- People are a strength: local ownership.
- Open minded people who promote the town are an asset.
- Historical presence gives our downtown roots: intimate involvement from variety of stakeholders lends a vision of future. Bridging this to 21st century is challenge.
- Downtown improvement district should be expanded, has been an asset for current downtown district (local jeweler who is outside of district); his area was once residential, has shifted to commercial recently.
- Access to a large population; downtown could be a destination for regional visitors.
- Late 50s/early 60s downtown had Midnight Madness; Bennington's downtown had "all the stores."
- The student population is both an asset and challenge; lack of proximity to this population (pedestrian students); makeup of downtown businesses may not attract students on weekends.
- Over reliance on visitors (skiers to bakery), need more locals especially in winter.
- Main St. businesses have major spikes which create volatility; how do we address this?
- Bennington wears its heart on north and east, pocketbook on south and west.
- Opportunities for development near downtown: more residential development downtown would help.
 - "I would like to move downtown and be able to walk."
 - Upper floors downtown could be developed.
- We lose our young people due to lack of employment.
- College kids have nothing to do downtown.
- Vacant storefronts because of expensive rent.
- Lack of public transit especially visitor's knowledge.
- Heart Theatre was an asset: need a "Main Event"
 - Theatre: new one could be coming "Old Castle"
- Bennington has name recognition and history attached even for out-of-staters.
- Aging population.
- Shrinking population (lowest high school class ever)
 - HS students at the student forum commented that downtown isn't for them; wanted to leave and not return; voiced powerlessness.
- We are trying to make things happen, lot of people are trying.
- Deferred maintenance is a problem: sidewalks need work.
- Lots of cultural events for a town this size.
- Proximity to scenic recreation activities.

Opportunities: What Should Be Done?

- Identify what we want to be: tailor businesses and hours of operation; more visitor-focused or locally-focused.
- May Fest: downtown spring festival: should galvanize local businesses.
- Manager system isn't good for visioning: need a Mayoral system.
- Tourism advertising: at a national level: "What state is Vermont in?"
- Bike path expansion: we are a natural destination.
- Opportunities for youth to be involved in outdoors.
- If we are a destination: was once excited about a big hotel/culinary destination. We have a large empty motel that could become a convention center and a nice restaurant downtown.
- Rec Department could expand and attract gym goers.
- Value added food kitchen.
- History & Food: historical tours guided or with headphones.
- Was once a green downtown: restore pond as well would necessitate removal of a strip mall.
- Freshman enrollment at college recently doubled. We should tap into this and make the downtown more aesthetically pleasing for students.
- Our Town grant program – partnership of municipality and arts organization: to seek downtown arts studio; could be arts activities all the time.
- Incentivize college students: welcome back nights in fall; discounts for students to shop downtown.
- Activity based opportunities for kids downtown – arts and crafts, etc.
- Skiing should be encouraged for locals and visitors.
- A specific community center for youth to give them a venue and reason to come downtown.
- Sports center downtown.
- Arts & Sports.

- Same core group does Garlic Fest, May Fest, etc... need to draw new people into the planning in order to expand downtown activities. Encourage responsibility in others; challenge residents.
- Flea market downtown in summer? (Brooklyn Flea model); could also house Farmers Market; use Armory Parking lot.
- Bypass is a huge challenge, fewer people will come through downtown when completed, what will be the results of this?
 - Opening of bypass is opportunity to get truck traffic out of downtown; could redesign downtown to play up this asset.
 - Many other towns are bypassed in VT and have built vital downtowns; downtown serves Bennington residents first and foremost, visitors will also come because it captures quintessential VT quality, not because it has WalMart.
- Food Store would be welcome addition to downtown – could be modest grocery store or coop.
- Can't force old version, must forge new road.
 - Paul: is there a consensual vision for future of downtown?
 - BBC has created a vision, devil is in details – brought out in bypass argument; we are on cusp of returning to mixed use downtown model after foray into big box suburbia as a nation.
- We don't have a traffic problem in reality: play this up by making it more pedestrian friendly instead of playing into parking displeasure.
- Winding, interesting streets create diverse downtown; enhanced by walking and biking trails.
- Museums, arts are an asset – recreate Battle of Bennington up to the date, tap into the history – live the history.
- Should shift our Main St. parking to diagonal orientation.
- Weekend tours around town with adults and children.
- Link historical resources with our celebrations.
- Ethan Allen day could be more linked to downtown. History should be more integral to downtown.
- We need to find downtown revitalization models from all over the nation.
- Farmers Market is an asset, continues to grow; weekends are like a party; should make this year round downtown.
- Professional entrepreneur recruitment.
- Signs that say "Truck Route" instead of "Bypass."
- Redevelop vacant upper stories is quicker and more cost efficient.
- Private owners, historic preservation rules are obstacles; limited resources.
- Officials should be greasing the wheel.
 - Paul: locals need to line up and make commitments to priorities; not a project of Historic Preservation or Sen. Leahy's office.

Reflections of the Community Visit Team

- Don't underestimate incremental success; never about one homerun idea solely
- Six years have made a big difference in downtown. Why is your downtown not thriving? Nothing to do or not giving people a reason? More marketing or fundamental change? Downtown redevelopment not brain surgery. Food coop is a good start. An idea now could be realized in a couple of years; be engaged in this process.
- Focus on branding: how do you market your community? I heard history a lot in this discussion. Start with one weekend and then build. Like distinction between Truck Rt. and Bypass. VT food is a great brand, capitalize on this: bring grocery downtown.
- Walkable downtown is an asset. Events on a Friday night for youth and college students.
- Bypass is opportunity. Basement teen center in Montpelier could be a nice model.
- Food coop. Diagonal parking. Naming: "Bennington" is an asset.
- Incremental change is the best way to make this process work. Claim many small victories. Old Castle Theatre could be a boon. Youth arts and sports are great avenues for development.
- Progress or decline? Felt a lot of optimism; downtown is on the rise; heard negativity from HS students; college would like to be more involved but there is a missing link – this provides opportunity.

Workforce Development

Resource Team: Molly Lambert (*facilitator*), Helen Labun Jordan (*scribe*), Ted Brady, Paul Bruhn, Paul Costello, Scott Humphrey, Helen Labun Jordan, Molly Lambert, Jenny Nelson, Steve Patterson, Ruth Wallman

What are the Assets and Challenges in this Area?

Assets

- Good group of talented & energized people who want to be in Bennington; some don't leave, others leave and come back.
- People from Bennington return because it "feels like home."
- Community is very welcoming to people arriving.
- Question of do we work to bring in more highly skilled people, develop skills of people in the community, how should the resources / time be allocated?

- Northeast region of the country seems to invest less in training existing workforce & staff than elsewhere. That includes advanced management skills, not only entry level.
- Community groups communicate and collaborate well, work together to get things done.
- There is a program for workers with poor soft skills (see below) that is a work experience immersion that doesn't pay, but introduces the workplace.
- People outside of Bennington have a positive view of the community, largely a better perception than the people actually *in* Bennington.
- Bennington is a good place for entrepreneurs and small businesses.
- Hospital has been able to work with higher education (VT Tech, Southern VT College) to build local workforce for healthcare, but they also have trouble with soft skills and managerial / supervisory level skills if they are hiring into a job (vs. growing their own).
- For recruiting workers into Bennington, housing at the mid-range cost, the reputation of the school system, and work potential for spouses are all challenges.
- Transportation at entry level for workers who may not have private vehicle or workers with disabilities is a problem.
- A high poverty workforce also works against the soft skills – one thing goes wrong (car breaks down, child is sick) and there is a much broader impact on work performance. This situation also leads to ongoing stress.
- Young people miss social opportunities of more urban area.
- Retaining young people who grew up here.
- Bennington's work options are seen as tourist town work, but that isn't really the town's strength. Marketing the area should include work opportunities outside of tourism industry, and marketing goods / services to non-tourists.
- Difficult to get employers to the table to talk about workforce issues, be proactive in workforce development when they can't fill positions.
- While some groups are very good about collaboration, there are also lots of different groups doing similar things in silos.

Challenges

- Entry level jobs that offer a livable wage are hard to find. Effects include people stuck in cycles of poverty, workers leaving to find work elsewhere, skilled workers working elsewhere because that's where they got starting wages at the level needed to live in Bennington.
- There is an overall high cost of living and of doing business.
- On skills of workforce from employers' perspective: Hard skills aren't major problems, in-house training can address them, but soft skill deficiencies (communication, teamwork, attitude, work ethic) are difficult to correct. This idea is repeated by multiple participants.

Opportunities: What Should Be Done?

- People want to succeed. If there is a large group of unemployed or underemployed residents, Bennington should invest in building their skills – for example the soft skills discussed under challenges. Community members can volunteer their assistance, particularly on things like soft skills, and there are local agencies that can coordinate. There are basic programs available, but they don't have the capacity to work with all the people needing assistance.
- Employers hiring people into Bennington work to connect them with local residents to learn about the region, share resumes of spouses with other employers.
- CCV can help students learn soft skills and basic career building skills (resume writing, interviewing). More employers and high school level educators can work with programs like this one.
- Build a central place to get information about what's happening in Bennington – an online portal to learn all you need to know about community activities. It's noted that it takes a lot of staff hours to get events on a centralized calendar.
- Target new business opportunities specifically designed to help underemployed area residents.
- Make more capital available locally for small businesses, second stage businesses.
- Develop an apprenticeship program.
- Match older workers with part time work.
- Synching brands – pulling in workers beyond tourism industry, matching up local perceptions with perceptions of those outside of Bennington.
- Look at the region, not just Bennington, for quality of life assets for workers.
- A resilient economy needs to focus on things that can't be outsourced, need creative economy. Creative and critical thinking skills are essential. Bennington College is good at not "teaching to the test" – other educational institutions can follow their lead. Also means people within workforce can follow changes, cycles in the economy – this requires a diverse portfolio of skills, diverse portfolio of businesses, and lifelong learning opportunities.
- Convene conversations between employers, organizations working with under/unemployed residents, high school, and CCV. Build better links between training and local job placement. (It's noted that there *is* this work being done, for example economic development committee, just needs more). Also noted that parents need to be part of reinforcing skills – particularly the soft skills.
- Help forgive parts of student loans if returning to Bennington (recommendation for state of Vermont).
- Build more support from state government for building soft skills, notes that there are statewide programs for hard skills. These are soft skills at supervisory level, not entry level. Noted that there *are* state funds for this purpose and that CVC can customize training for local businesses.
- Job opportunities in caregiving for aging population, industry always needs more people, demographics indicate it will be growing, and you can't outsource it. It's an invisible industry – it needs both training and marketing to jobseekers.

Reflections of the Community Visit Team

- Brand can mean multiple things, both historic place to visit and place to do business.
- Economic development committee is good base, sounds like it needs more people.
- Training, housing, entertainment are key. Obviously soft skills are a big concern. Housing is a statewide effort, not just Bennington – may not be solvable in a town working alone. Entertainment is important to bring people back.
- Bennington has a diverse starting base of industries; there are more businesses to engage who weren't at this session.
- Communications between people in town about what is available is important, particularly bringing more education folks into workforce development conversation.
- Note resource of small business development centers that wasn't mentioned.
- Welcome home money sounds great, the question though is what can a single town do to implement?
- Mobius is a mentoring organization in Burlington for school age kids that may be a good model.
- Soft skills that are so clearly a need now is a big change from the past, when Vermont advertised the work ethic of its workforce. There's been a fundamental cultural shift.
- Worries about the negative narrative of what Bennington is. Students in school session had a negative narrative paired with attitude of not contributing themselves but rather waiting for someone else.
- Involving young people in visible signs that community is moving forward, sense of momentum, community vision and celebration.
- When talk about basic skills, lifelong learning, flexibility with changing economic times, being comfortable with computers & the Internet will be important.
- A community's wealth is not so much in money but also citizen engagement. Success is measured in success of engagement, of children, of elders and of business. This Community Visit process is about building on that full understanding of community wealth.

Economic Development and Growth

Resource Team: Paul Costello (*facilitator*), Scott Humphrey (*scribe*), Ted Brady, Paul Bruhn, Helen Labun Jordan, Molly Lambert, Jenny Nelson, Steve Patterson, Ruth Wallman

What are the Assets and Challenges in this Area?

Assets

- Three strong anchors make it easier to attract new people to the community: 1) Hospital; 2) Three Colleges soon to be four; 3) Manufacturing Sector supports other enterprises.
- Diversity of interests, passions.
- Location: proximity to Albany, Massachusetts.
- Infrastructure for commercial and industrial development: great water supply; good municipal sewer; highways.
- Good place to live.
- People are friendly, helpful.
- New TV show with Kevin White.
- Outdoor recreation: hunting, fishing.
- Foliage season (could be an underutilized asset).
- Main St.
- Agriculture may be on the rise: growing interest in local ag.
- Local history and many long term businesses.
- Numerous smaller industries and businesses with good national/international reps: puts Bennington on the map.
- Chamber of Commerce.
- BBC.
- We have a Town Plan.
- Good leadership: diverse and experienced.
- Economic Task Force: trying to limit overlap/duplication and work strategically and in unified fashion; recently developed mission statement. Looking at Housing, Marketing, Retention, Special initiatives, Recruiting.
- Have done recruitment and put word out and brought economic development team together.

- CAPPA Center: Bennington College; could be conference center.
- Annual events are successful: Garlic Fest; May Fest: brings people and money in.

Challenges

- We haven't articulated all of our good assets and infrastructure.
- Lack of synergy in efforts.
- Vacant plots downtown.
- Not capitalizing on institutions of higher education/ doesn't feel like a college town.
- College faculty are part time and not integrated into community, often don't live in Bennington.
- Northshire has become much more appealing for homeowners and entrepreneurs.
- Future of hunting is dubious.
- Large and growing underprivileged minority in our community: they are intrinsically linked to the health of our economy.
- Hard for us to source our products locally: trying to do it with meals at the Hospital is not easy.
- Many vacant buildings are not for sale.
- Low opinion of quality of school system makes it harder to recruit workers.
- Uncertainty of whose role it is to carry out projects like improving downtown curb-appeal: Private owners or BBC?
- Non-resident owners don't care about aesthetic quality of the bldgs.

Opportunities: What Should Be Done?

- Developable land near and in downtown: one notorious landowner seems to control vacant plots.
- College students could be strongly engaged: they have disposable income.
- Green Mountain Transit Authority (GMTA) has reached out to students to link colleges to downtown: links to larger regional metropolitan areas.
- Liaison at colleges.
- Was once hunting destination, no longer so: should be able to fund our outdoor recreation.
- 30-40 year olds are underutilized as consumers: could attract those who want to “escape the suburbs.”
- Focus on smaller businesses: easier to start and have potential for growth. Focus on industries that can complement our core anchor industries. Supply chain of those existing clusters.
- Composites industry: trust is important.
- 99% of hunting economy is conducted overseas: keeping the product American made (Illusion Camo - entrepreneur): localize seamstresses. Critically analyze consequences of outsourcing. Made in Vermont brand is strong.
- Creating a Food System Council could be a strategy to help with local food economy for Hospital meals, for example.
- Outsourcing: Brattleboro Foreign Trade Zone has extended invitation.
- Create better fits for retail spaces and those seeking vacancies.
- Create more low income housing.
- IT Infrastructure deserves more investment: ability to attract and retain tech businesses will increase.
- Small business financing: address risk-averse culture: increase access to capital.
- Revolving loan programs exist but are limited in what they give: could become more daring in what we do as a Town in our partnerships with banks. (Conservative lending practices have led to bank solvency however).
- Amenity changes could make city more beautiful and attract businesses.
- Memorial Park urban plan: re-envision our downtown with green spaces in mind and downtown recreation opportunities.
- Curb appeal: enhance architecture of our downtown buildings.
- Bike path: groups are working to complete “Guerilla Bike Path” by the end of the summer. Providing safe walk ways for our underserved populations. Will take people from downtown to College and other residential loops.
- Local farmers need to work more cooperatively to share equipment and facilities as well as distribution to bring down the cost of eating local, organic products. This will make it easier for local businesses to source locally (Bakery example of using local flour). Local demand will drive competition for local farmers and build their capacity.
- Career development services through school system.
- Demographics of community create challenges in school system: 75% of students on Free or Reduced Lunch.
- Promote this as a place for retirement: hospital, they have disposable income.
- Be more open to commercial zoning: too much is industrial.
- Strive to bring 21st century industry to create good jobs with live-able wages.
- Common vision: common voice, slogan, strategy.
- Local tradespeople: develop their skills to compete for federal dollars.
- Build better lines of communication between those doing economic development.
- We do have a slogan: Vermont Strong – use this to highlight assets and brand power of state.
- Need our state behind us especially with capital investment.
- VT Composites: technology driven and very strong garnered respect regionally and nationally. Appreciate what we have.
- Require businesses to provide a live-able wage
- Small, actionable plan: we have school organized fireside chats. Why should I stay in VT? – build a positive narrative.
- Elections tend to build a common vision: could restructure in order to help us create a common vision – relates earlier to Mayoral v. Managerial debate.
- We need to encourage candidates to have platforms before elections.
- Mobilize the 75% who are not at the table (Free or Reduced lunch).
- Cultivating small business: incubator space (shared resources, marketing, real estate).

Reflections of the Community Visit Team

- Creative economy is a useful framework for seeing local economic development: camo example was illuminating. Support entrepreneurs and celebrate culture of entrepreneurship.
- Sourcing local food was a fruitful discussion. Sourcing your life from local businesses.
- What do you have here to build on? Many strong local economic sectors.
- Manufacturing sector is a unique asset and envy of the state. Engaging higher education in the community is a key priority.
- Access to capital continues to be a challenge. Banks acting differently down south? Low perception about the school system has been a common theme: do you address perception at schools or in community economic development?
- Economic development task force is a great asset. Need for liaisons: to low income, non-resident property owners, farmers. Aging population and possible trajectory towards retirement creates opportunities and challenges. Link hospital to local farms.

- New small businesses should support clusters. Small business mentorship programs. Loan limits should be looked at. Interest rate buy-down; rent subsidies to help small businesses. Startups can't afford more debt. Local food hubs should be looked into. CEO/Small business network: pooling assets and sources.
- Sense of pride, able to articulate a long list of assets. Balanced by this deep problem of poverty which deeply affects youth. How do you give people faith that this is a place for youth in the future and that they have a voice? Visible things that make a difference for perception of school.

Communications and Collaboration

Resource Team: Patricia Coates (*facilitator*), Sean Sheehan (*scribe*), Alex Aldrich, Joe Bookchin, Greg Brown, Mary Evslin, Marie Houghton, Tara Kelly, Colleen Pelles Madrid, Deb Shannon, Michael Wood-Lewis

What are the Assets and Challenges in this Area?

Assets

- The community radio station - WBTN (1370 AM) has 56 programs throughout the week. It almost closed twice, but keeps going and came up huge during Irene. It's normally closed on weekends (auto-programmed), but during Irene the staff went in to communicate over the weekend throughout the crisis. A lot of people don't listen to AM radio, but WBTN also streams online and thus reaches a larger audience.
- CAT-TV comes to every community event (including this) and features a community calendar.
- Bennington Banner.
- The Penny Saver.
- When Vermont's Congressional delegation comes down, it fosters communication with American Legion, Elks, and many others.
- Local schools have websites where schools communicate outward.
- Bennington's Interfaith Council is seen as a model of information sharing and collaboration.
- Facebook pages – The hospital, colleges, tobacco coalition, Banner, and many others have a presence on Facebook. As far as collaboration on the social networking site, a select board member recently started a Bennington events page on Facebook.
- Knights of Columbus, Lions Club, and other service organizations are involved with so many events and are great informal communicators, publicizing key news and information through word of mouth.
- A half dozen organizations collaborate to pull off the Bennington Car Show each year.
- A lot of collaboration happens between social service groups and education organizations.
- The old fashioned kiosk/ bulletin board at the four corners is so important for displaying flyers that reach seniors and others who don't go online (estimated to be ¼ of Bennington folks).
- Chamber of Commerce has a newsletter, as do other communities (in arts, health, etc.) – though many of these newsletters are moving to online-only. The Chamber is also a great networking resource and source of information for folks who are new to town.
- Because Bennington is small, word of mouth is very effective. It's easy for anyone to pick up the phone and call the Chamber President or any other key player in town.

Challenges

- Broadband service is hit or miss.
- Bennington County Industrial Corporation (BCIC) comes up with plans for business and manufacturing but their efforts feel isolated (though it feels like this is starting to improve, and hopefully today's process will help further that trend).
- Negative news is often easier to disseminate than positive news.
- New communications means are needed as press releases don't seem to generate news coverage.
- There's a lot of division in the community that is exacerbated when challenges arise. There are so many people doing so many good things, but controversy and polarization linger for years and years. For example, 1) there is a state of the art middle school but some districts don't send their kids there, 2) it took three votes before the new school was approved, and 3) a zoning fight over the new fire station dragged on for several years before it was resolved and the station was built.
- High poverty rates and illiteracy rates present challenges. When tough challenges arise, significant populations don't feel comfortable coming to talk about them. Are outreach materials accessible to all?
- By compelling human services, arts and others to have their budgets voted on at the ballot each year, the message sent to the community is: "these elements are optional."
- The select board and other leaders often have good news that they aren't allowed to share for an extended period of time, due to privacy and confidentiality (e.g. when a business is planning to move to town).
- People are overextended and that makes it hard for people to engage, especially poor segments. Poor people often have two jobs. Coming to a community event means finding time outside of work, arranging childcare, arranging transport, etc.
- Arts and local foods are often seen as elitist and not essential to community health.
- There are so many good organizations; it feels like their work can be diluted.
- High tech communication is a double-edged sword. Since we started televising town meetings, in-person attendance at Town Meeting has plummeted. People watch it on TV (and talk about it with select board members at grocery store) but don't come and thus don't participate with their comments. Public attendance at select board meetings is virtually non-existent, typically only a newspaper reporter and maybe someone from the Chamber of Commerce.

Opportunities: What Should be Done?

- Consolidate some organizations (because there are so many good ones).
- Make sure that everyone feels that they're being listened to and respected, regardless of their economic or educational situation.
- Foster discussions of a shared vision. This can break down silos. For example, the Planning Commission and health agencies realized they had a shared vision for healthy Bennington then collaborated on a Safe Routes to School program.
- Foster neighborhood connections. Folks in the session had different views of the current state of affairs on this front. One man felt residents don't know neighbors like they did in the 1960s, but another woman said she can name everyone on her block – something she certainly couldn't do ten years ago. She feels like there's a community renewal here.
- Deeper understanding of solutions is needed. Understanding poverty is one thing, but understanding what it takes to get people out of poverty is what's actually needed (and currently lacking).
- Support the farmers market, midnight madness, and other events that are so great at bringing people out and building community.
- Turn empty storefronts into study centers for kids after school, educating the community about how to use the Internet (though someone else pointed out that the library is already downtown, as is a tutorial center – though a lot of people don't know that it's there).
- Use "spotlight communication" to feature community resources like the tutorial center.
- Deal with class divisions that make people feel uncomfortable going to an event at the College.
- Find ways to bridge the transportation gap. Bennington needs to accommodate for 1) small children, 2) people who don't have cars, and 3) people in wheelchairs.
- Find a physical community center. This multi-purpose space can serve as an indoor location for the farmers market in winter, etc.
- Find successful models of cross-generational activities that are working (e.g. senior volunteers watching children) and implement them across the community.
- In any situation, think about content – specifically what's going to be relevant to people – as well as how it's being talked about.
- Look at the 20-35 year old range – they are our future and they bring a lot to the table.
- Listen. Too often, people are quick to think they know best for other people and will give them advice, rather than to listen to what they need. "Bridges out of Poverty" is a great training to help you learn what class you are and how to understand and listen to people in other classes.

Reflections of the Community Visit Team

- Towns can have interplay of Town/Gown, Haves/Have Nots, Locals/From Away. We didn't hear a lot on message. What is Bennington's mission statement? We know it's there. We heard a lot of assets. Who are the other service providers? How do we bring them to conversation?
- We often see the 'usual suspects' come to meetings like this. We've heard from the folks who wear six hats in town. And we've heard about people in poverty being cut out. But what about people who are middle class and above who still aren't here and aren't involved in civic life? There's a huge untapped resource there too.
- There's a cadre of leadership in this room – representing businesses, clients, etc. A big challenge is communicating to people outside the room.

Arts, Recreation, & Entertainment

Resource Team: Alex Aldrich (*facilitator*), Marie Houghton (*scribe*), Joe Bookchin, Greg Brown, Patricia Coates, Mary Evslin, Tara Kelly, Colleen Pelles Madrid, Deb Shannon, Sean Sheehan, Michael Wood-Lewis

What are the Assets and Challenges in this Area?

Assets – Arts:

- A broad range of opportunities to experience/participate in the arts/culture for both youth and adults: Bennington Museum, Bennington Choral Society, Robert Frost Museum, Toy Museum, Dance School, Youth Orchestra, Historical Society, exhibits at Bennington College and So VT College, Art in the Park, Plein Air Vermont, high school plays and concerts.
- Musicians from all over the world come to the Bennington Piano Camp.
- The Bennington Arts Center draws artists from all over the country.
- Bennington College provides access to arts and cultural opportunities.
- Williams College (MA) provides free access to music and other arts/cultural programming.
- Bennington has many 'festivals': Quilt Festival, Garlic Festival, May-Fest, Blue Grass Festival, British Invasion.

Assets – Entertainment:

- “Off-the-Wall”
- Open mike nights at South Street Café
- “Whirling Twirler”
- Local cafes and bars

Assets – Recreation:

- Bennington Rec Center
- Walking/biking trails
- Riding Camps
- Skiing
- Tennis
- Soccer
- Mile-Around Woods
- Summer camps
- After School programs
- Mt Anthony Country Club
- Three Fitness Centers
- New England Conservatory: hiking, birding, trails, programs
- Green Mountain Club

Challenges

- Need public commitment; many choices and people make decisions at the last minute; no longer support “season tickets.”

- Lack of awareness of what is available, need to connect people, coordinate transportation, community calendar.
- Need to coordinate not compete.
- Need a ‘hub’ for information sharing; community calendar.
- Transportation / Access.
- Affordability – many families cannot afford to participate.
- Theatre participants come from out of town; need opportunities/access for people in town.
- Lack of general public facility for sports: basketball court, hockey, etc.
- Colleges do try to partner with the community to provide access to sports related opportunities.
- Need safe walking and bike paths for access to schools, playgrounds, shopping.
- Lack of diverse programming – reason people travel to MA.
- Kids feel that there is ‘nothing to do,’ offerings do not meet their interests.
- Not enough volunteers.
- Have lots of very good ideas, committees get started putting plans together, no way to sustain. Ideas hard/impossible to implement. Lack of a strategic plan.
- Need a safer place for youth to hang-out. The Rec Center feels unsafe; needs more adult supervision.
- Kids would like to be able to work, live and raise their future families in Bennington, but don’t see opportunities.

Opportunities: What Should be Done?

- Better Bennington Corp (BBC) is interested in and promotes livable community, vital downtown. Haven’t been successful in Friday Night initiatives. Worked for townspeople to close off streets, offer entertainment; but did not help local businesses. Need to reach out and find ways to involve/engage community members who are “not board of director types.”
- Youth wants a voice.
- Kids want to be involved in the arts; need opportunity and access.
- Teens for Change program works well; need more emphasis on outreach to engage more kids; expand communications / publicity – use social media.
- Need diverse options for kids so they have a place to go, contact with adults to share information/mentor/guide them.
- GLBT club/community needed especially for youth.
- Consolidate some of the groups/organizations that have similar missions; find ways to collaborate rather than compete.
- Seek out funding opportunities from foundations/other supporters for help in creating strategies for the community; developing collaborative partnerships.
- “We need a plan – can’t stand here and wish!” Select board need to join/support community strategic plan. OK to take 15-20 years to implement.
- Better utilization of public/other buildings; i.e.; schools, fire house, etc.
- Youth religious group enjoys broad participation – most are not “church kids.” What are they doing right?

Reflections of the Community Visit Team

- Community needs a long term strategy for sustainability.
- Wealth of opportunities to participate in arts, recreation, entertainment.
- Barriers are competition, affordability, insufficient/ineffective communications.
- Committed volunteers; concern about volunteer ‘fatigue’ due to lack of a plan, support from the community and funding.
- A concerned and engaged youth population who want/need programming that supports their interests – 25 to 30 youth joined the discussion!
- Youth with higher education aspirations.
- Youth who want to be able to have good jobs and raise families in Bennington.
- Need formal and informal mentoring opportunities for youth – they want adult interest/supervision.

Memorable quotes:

“As a taxpayer, I don’t even want to vote. Too many separate activities. Need to put the money together and have a plan.”

“We need a plan – can’t stand here and wish.”

Bennington Self Image

Resource Team: Patricia Coates (*facilitator*), Sean Sheehan (*scribe*), Alex Aldrich, Joe Bookchin, Greg Brown, Mary Evslin, Marie Houghton, Tara Kelly, Colleen Pelles Madrid, Deb Shannon, Michael Wood-Lewis

What are the Assets and Challenges in this Area?

Assets

- Residents have personal stories and testimonies of the school system's strength (including from one real estate agent who has sold over 1600 homes in Bennington). There are exceptional teachers, exceptional administrators, and, even in this tough economic climate, the town just voted three to one in favor of the school budget.
- There's an external perception that "the school system stinks." This perception is held by many parents, kids, real estate agents, and people in other states, but participants in the session were adamantly in agreement that this perception is wrong.

Challenges

- There's a perception that there's nothing to do downtown and that the jobs are all gone and they're never coming back.
- Poverty is a big factor. Eighty percent of the students – way above state average – get free or reduced lunch. Poverty is not personally a problem for people who are moving to Bennington, but rather for people who are here and feel stuck here.
- A plane crash in the mid-1960s killed Bennington's best and brightest educators, leaving the community to suffer from years from PTSD, high turnover rates in the schools, and a stark "before and after" view of Bennington's educational system.

- Bennington has an identity crisis. It can't decide whether we want to be a small modern city or a quaint New England village. It's sort of in Berkshires, but not. It's sort of Vermont, but not Burlington or the vacation destinations. It's sort of the Albany, NY region, but not.
- People have memory of a bustling 1950s downtown and anything the town has now is viewed in contrast to that.
- There is a perception that change and positive action are much slower to occur in Bennington than in other places. There's a perception that there are good ideas in town that never go anywhere. People only have so much energy and give up hope when things don't seem to happen.
- People choose to live here (and thus take lower paying jobs) so that they can be near their family and their networks. This can make it tough for outsiders moving in. If you step on someone's toes, you step on a whole network of toes.
- People hold grudges from when they were in 3rd grade.
- The 10 or 15% kids who have behavioral issues dominate the attention of the schools' faculty and staff.
- The town's self-image problem isn't created by kids, it's created by adults.

Opportunities: What Should be Done?

- We have to dispense hope. A full quarter of Mt. Anthony kids don't graduate. So many of the kids on free lunch have had hope pulled out from under them.
- We need to change perceptions of technical schools and instill pride in the students who attend them. Currently, we undermine kids by telling them they have to go to college. If they don't want to or can't, they have no hope. But the reality is that if they go into a trade, and take an apprenticeship seriously, they can own their own business in this town.
- We should have more programs for children. Businesses should have more programs that interact with children. This is currently not a child friendly community.
- We need a venue to get positive news out. The Bennington Banner is the Bible in this town. Everyone reads it. They do a lot of things right, but they also report poverty, negative press (though other participants raised a contrasting view of the Banner, saying that it always has pictures of smiling kids and that the schools publish in the Banner, telling story of all the positive things they're doing).
- We need to get people to focus on being part of the greater Bennington community, rather than just seeing themselves as Old Bennington or North Bennington.
- Governance needs to be more pro-active. The challenge is that committees tend to be more reactionary than an individual, and in Bennington there is a whole select board rather than a mayor, not to mention seven different school boards.
- We need to acknowledge and affirm youth, people in poverty, and other marginalized folks. We saw in earlier session how young people stepped up when they were affirmed. There are three generations of housekeepers at the hospital who know all about the building, the internal politics, and so on, but nobody ever asks their opinion.
- We need to acknowledge and embrace that Bennington is the cultural and economic center for a large region (between Albany and Brattleboro, Pittsfield and Rutland). We need to step up and talk to the outside world about all the wonderful things happening here. We don't get much TV coverage, but we can seize responsibility to go to statewide business expos and play up Bennington's businesses as well as all the arts and recreation happenings.
- Time Banks could be a great way of highlighting all the wonderful resources in this community. Everyone in network has something of value. Someone with a ladder can clean someone's gutters, while someone else can watch the kids so a couple can go on a date.

- Let's tackle something very doable.
- The select board, the Chamber, RSVP and others in town should give more public recognition to folks who step up. Giving recognition really seemed to make an impact on two heroic Irene responders.
- A website will soon highlight students' achievements and also do "where are they now" features on adults who graduated from Mt Anthony.

- We need to acknowledge that poverty exists just a couple blocks off of Main St. If we don't acknowledge poverty, we'll never achieve change.

Reflections of the Community Visit Team

- There's so much potential here. Could a marketing firm be tapped to come up with a town slogan? (a participant pointed out that Bennington used to be "the city of fountains")
- There's so much going on here. The challenge doesn't seem to be doing new things, but rather how to tell the story.
- When folks in the rest of the state hear about Bennington, it's usually a story related to the bypass – which makes folks think maybe Bennington doesn't want people to come into town. For every story about the bypass, there should be five positive stories about artists and festivals, etc. that send a message of "come on down!"
- People in this conversation haven't been arguing steadfastly that 'this is the problem,' they've been saying "there are a lot of misperceptions about Bennington." That leaves the door

open to counteract those misperceptions and call attention to all the wonderful things that are happening.

- Bennington needs to celebrate small successes and have a grassroots campaign to reach out to the quiet middle.
- Bennington is one of the best kept secrets in that state. The town could send marketing pieces north inviting folks down for a festival and to stay overnight, with a discounted package.
- People here are believers, but everyone knows at least one doubter. Engage those doubters and learn more about why they feel the way they feel.
- A vision statement for what Bennington wants to be in five or ten years – or how you want to be seen in Albany or Burlington – hasn't emerged in this conversation. That's a key next step.

Resource Team Debrief Session

General Observations

- There are a lot of communications outlets, but getting information to people is still a frequently cited challenge.
- A lot of agencies are doing good things, but there's not enough coordination or collaboration.

Poverty

- 15% poverty Bennington, 11% statewide.
- Poverty in Bennington is getting worse. There is increased dependence on food shelves.
- There has been a strong faith-based community response from five or six churches.
- Local foods were talked about as a solution.
- Transportation is a challenge for low-income residents. There is a physical separation as no buses travel from residential core to downtown and there are no sidewalks.

Downtown

- More needs to be done to re-brand and promote downtown.
- College students don't always feel invited downtown. Leadership acknowledged that more can be done to attract them.
- One idea is to call the bypass a truck route and drive other traffic downtown.
- Downtown festivals can be promoted and celebrated more widely.

Communication and Collaboration

- Bennington features a robust list of assets – WBTN radio, Banner, Penny Saver, CAT-TV, etc.
- Undercurrents are pervasive of us vs. them, divisions around class and newcomers vs. old-timers, optimists vs. pessimists.
- Bad news travels faster than good news.
- Split perceptions on the state of neighborhood communication. Some participants thought fewer people knew their neighbors, while others thought that situation was improving.

Youth and Education

- Regarding assets, schools, services, and faith-based efforts all got high marks.
- Kids need hopes, dreams, and aspirations.
- Mentoring was a big theme. Kids from tough backgrounds don't need money, they need time and involvement from adults.
- The school calendar was discussed. The 8am-2:30pm, September-June schedule doesn't work for working families.
- Some schools are community centers - a focal point that's open 7am-10pm.
- Connections were made between schools and Bennington's poor self-image. There's a feeling that they can get word out about wonderful things students are doing and that doing so would help the whole community.

Workforce

- Three focal points were: training people, housing people, and entertaining people (keeping them interested in staying in the community).
- The session did not have diverse representation. There were folks from colleges, health care, and a few small businesses, but nobody from manufacturing.
- The cost of housing is a challenge.
- There's a severe lack of soft skills in the workforce. One anecdote was of a Manchester firm that offered a 3% pay raise if employees were on time for their first two weeks of work. They never had to pay out.

Arts, Recreation, and Entertainment

- Frustration driven by the perception that schools should be available to community (basketball courts, etc.) butting up against the reality that school groups need them for all of their teams and clubs.
- There's a lack of awareness of a lot of recreational resources.
- Very few activities are directed at low-income people; participation/attendance fees are high.
- Young people didn't want to just be invited; they want to help plan activities and events.

Economic Development and Growth

- Businesses and entrepreneurs need greater access to capital.
- There is interest in developing a food hub.
- The town needs a common voice and vision.

Bennington Self-Image

- People in attendance were those who thought Bennington was a cool place and shouldn't have an image problem.
- Schools are quite good, they just can't get word out. Arts are good, but they don't get word out.
- The group acknowledged that poverty and employment issues need to be addressed.
- Bennington needs a vision and something to rally around for the next five years.
- There is a need for both better local communication and external marketing. How do we get stories out to Chittenden County and Montpelier about good things going on?



The Bennington Fire House truck bay was transformed on Community Visit Day for a Town sponsored free pizza dinner for residents and visiting team members.

Mt. Anthony Union High School Forum Notes

Compiled from discussions held with 170 high school students on March 8, 2012

What's going on today in Bennington that makes it a good place? What are you proud of?

- More kids starting to play sports at a younger age which keeps kids out of trouble.
- More things are going green; more awareness around helping the environment.
- The downtown has refurbished a lot – lights, activity, things to do.
- Events like the Garlic Fest, Car Show, Moose Fest, May Fest, Midnight Madness, and other community activities put on by the town or stores bring thousands of people to town. We have lots of tourists.
- Another car dealership came to town so car sales must be going well.
- Our school. Education isn't bad. Could be improved but we're doing alright.
- Good athletics: we have a "dirty" (aka very good) wrestling team.
- Career Development Center (CDC) is an asset. It helps a lot of people figure out what they want to do and they also have adult education classes.
- We have free will, there are no restrictions.
- It's a safe place to live most of the time; no one is getting jumped.
- The old people's home is an asset.
- We have a Planned Parenthood for protection against pregnancy.
- Multi-cultural.
- Bennington Rotary fundraises for scholarships.
- Scenery and foliage, mountains; no billboards.
- Small town businesses.
- Quiet, not so commercial.
- Great local hospital to give birth.
- The hospital offers a free clinic downtown near Main Street.
- Willow Park is a good place. Howard Park in Shaftsbury.
- Highway is being put in which is both good and bad. It will cut off 10 minutes between here and Brattleboro but no one will come into town, they will just bypass it.

What are the Challenges facing Bennington?

- 5 out of the 90 students at one forum said they plan to live in Bennington after they graduate. 12 plan to stay in Vermont. Most are planning to leave Vermont.
- Not a fun or good place to live so everyone just wants to get out of here. No good reason to stay.
- There's nothing to do and nothing is good about Bennington.
- Most kids just walk around town. You get bored bowling or going to movies – can only do that so many times.
- There's nothing to do so people smoke weed.
- Bad drug problems here. People resort to drugs and alcohol because there's not a lot to do.
- Drugs in this town need to be cleaned out.
- Everyone has an attitude that they don't want to be here. They wish their parents never moved here.
- No opportunities in Bennington. Don't want to come back here after college because there aren't opportunities to support a family here.
- Bennington is good place to raise a family but there are no good jobs here.
- Stores are going under so people are losing jobs and being laid off.
- Not many jobs. Nobody looking for help around here. High School students are at the bottom of the totem pole for getting jobs.
- Local businesses are going down and major companies are taking their place, like Dollar Stores. WalMart shut Wendy's down.
- Zoning laws are too tight. Can't build a mill in one location because it's only meant for housing.
- Shopping wise – same old things. No diverse restaurants.
- Town seems to put things in without considering why. Our money goes to pointless stuff, not things that make the community better. A new Petco is coming in but we don't need another pet store.
- We have 5 dollar stores but not one nice clothing store.
- We have more car dealerships than anything.
- The new businesses seem to be more geared to adults. Not enough for the youth community. Albany has clubs that kids can hang out in. We had NAPS a couple years ago but it isn't here anymore.
- A lot of empty buildings: super store, blockbuster, rent-a-center, cvs. The old middle school is vacant. Something else needs to be there.
- Don't have name brand hotels except Hampton Inn and Best Western.
- Tourists don't have places to shop. Only everyday stores like WalMart or K-Mart. Have to go half hour to 45 minutes away to go shopping.
- Bennington didn't want to be a business district.
- Most buildings look old.
- Vandalism. The old middle school was vandalized and so was the Grotto.
- Gang affiliations and gang activity. The Banner has been talking about it. Someone's car got blown up and maybe it was gang related.
- We have stray animals that aren't being taken care of.
- High poverty rate; not enough jobs; people on welfare.

- Not enough affordable housing. At minimum wage you can't afford the price of apartments or housing.
- Gas prices and costs going up. You have to drive to get anywhere. Tough on household budgets. People find it hard to pay for gas to get places.
- No transportation for kids to get places. Things are so spread out they can't get there on foot. They're too young to drive, and have no money for gas.
- Our community is so spread out. It's hard for people who live in Pownal or Shaftsbury to feel connected. It takes ½ hour to go grocery shopping which also costs a lot in gas.
- Pownal and Woodville people tend to go to MA rather than Bennington.
- Need money to do things, not a lot of free activities. Not easy to find a job and get money to do things.
- Welfare is too easy to get. They just hand the money out without making sure the people are trying to maintain a job and steady income.
- Sometimes the focus on welfare piece isn't as balanced – some people have 2nd and 3rd jobs because they aren't paid enough to pay the bills. A lot of people in poverty are working hard but don't have high enough paying jobs.
- Teachers complain that they don't get paid enough. They should get a summer job – the rest of us have to work year-round.
- New highway under construction. There are questions about why they made it; what was wrong with the way it was? Why not fix roads instead and put more things to do here? Instead of making Bennington better they're bypassing it completely.
- New roads are going in that are nice but the new highway means people won't even have to go into Bennington. What will bring people in to town?
- The highway makes the town look ugly. It will affect us.
- The roads are bad. There's no money to keep them up.
- There's a dirt road in North Bennington that is always in disrepair: Paran Acres.
- There's no open indoor gym to go play basketball. The school gym gets booked for school sports but they don't even have enough space for all the sports that need space. The dance girls have to practice in the hallway.
- Rec Center is scary. Not fun to be around. Sketchy people hang out there. Bathrooms are creepy.
- The Recreation Center is pretty outdated. It's a bad place to hang out.
- Indoor tennis courts are expensive.
- People interrupt practices at the tennis center. People are bored.
- No skate park in Bennington.
- Need more lanes in our bowling alley.
- Festivals are geared more for adults.
- Adults have a negative view of the kids in town. Even when we do positive stuff, like go to the rec center, adults will yell at you. We don't want to be seen at those places because people in town look bad on them.
- The town doesn't seem to really care about school sport events. They don't come out to games or meets.
- We have strong sports teams usually – but they are starting to go downhill.
- This is an identified 'failing school.' It's got a bad record. It's not a school that colleges look at which is a problem and a worry for students.
- Bennington has a high teenage pregnancy rate; lots of young parents here. There's a daycare center at the high school. But it's also a regular business; people from all over the community use it.
- Scenery-wise Manchester is similar to Bennington but they can draw more tourists because they have other things tourists want like good stores, restaurants, hotels.
- Bennington has no diversity. Only Caucasians and people are closed minded.
- Self-image is a challenge in and of itself. Our self image is that there's nothing to do. How do you break out of the sense that there's nothing to do.
- People sit back and wait for things to change and something to happen. Whose responsibility is it? It's a challenge that the town has.
- People think change can't come because of the economy. How will we have money to make a rec center?
- So many multi-generational families and people who never get out of Bennington. They don't have knowledge of what it's like outside Bennington. Don't have educated opinions. It brings everything down.
- Nothing encouraging here, nothing here that makes kids want to be successful unless they're playing sports.
- Most people haven't travelled a lot so they don't have new ideas. Need to travel to see how others live to know what's possible. Need hope to make change.

What can be done to make Bennington a dynamic place to live?

- We need more stuff to do. Need a big activity center/field house or a YMCA where we can play basketball or have a dance. We need a building to go play baseball during cold months.
- We need a community center/rec center or a YMCA with basketball courts, weight room, pool, place to Spar, a place people can go practice their sports.
- Bring in a YMCA or boys or girls club for basketball courts, a nicer pool, weight room, free things to do. Y's make jobs for people too.
- Create a Skate Park – people skate in this town so much.
- Offer more recreational sports for kids. In general the only sports people focus on are Little League or wrestling.
- Music center would be cool where you can play instruments or guitar. There is one shop on Main St. The HS has a chorus and

band but not for public use. It would be great to have a public place to go play like a guitar center.

- Create a music venue. Spreading the love of music.
- Renovate the old empty buildings with things to do.
- Build something that would keep teens out of trouble. At Town Meeting Day it was hard to look at the budget and understand where the money is going and what's being funded. Bennington free library asking for another 12k; school wants to add \$23 million to the budget. That's a lot of money. What do you get for that? Need more transparency and access to information and openness in the budget process so the citizens can have more of a voice. Include specific activities in there that would help keep kids out of trouble.
- Restore some of the old mills and buildings like the button hotel or rebuild the hark theater that burnt down in the 70s. Old Castle is looking for a place to go.
- Catamount and old middle school are just sitting there to rot. They are unsafe. There could be a workforce go in and clean them it up to make them safe. Catamount is putting soccer in there but why target one sport? We need a recreational center for more sports.
- Better movie theatre, IMAX.
- Arcade game store.
- More activity up at ____ House. Have a concession stand.
- Clean it up more – there's a lot of trash in the street. Greenup day is viewed as a day people don't litter, not a day they pick up trash.
- Our school needs to be updated; creepy stairwells.
- Make Bennington a more business friendly place. Right now you have to jump through hoops with flaming monkey's to get your idea out there. Drop the useless and redundant regulations. Drop the working age to 15 to be able to pump gas or work the mill.
- Need more publicized activities.
- Publicize Bennington more. No one knows about it.
- Have a museum that is more publicized.
- Bennington Museum charges high admission for small town with a lot of poverty. Make it accessible for people that live here. A pass for local folks.
- Fix some of its roads and bridges. Infrastructure is old.
- Cut wasteful spending. Put money toward a more organized business bureau instead of on frivolous activities.
- More industry so that people can have a decent job out of high school.
- More events on raising school spirit so the town is more into it and engaged.
- Maybe students could volunteer around town and get the word out about athletic events and invite people.
- Make it required for students to do community service so they are better prepared for college and they know better what they want to do in the future. There is no requirement in the school district to do it now.
- Community services program should go to an actual workplace or offer internships. So the community gets to know the kids as helpful in the community.
- Clean up the drugs in this town because there's an abundance of them.
- We need more localized economy – keep the money in the community. We don't get tourists unless it's the fall.
- Should have a Bennington Day that brings in families and make things to sell.
- Close down Main Street once a month in the summer for a "May Fest" type event.
- More name brand shops.
- Train to link us to Albany and a rail trail from N Benn to Benn. Would address diversity issue and diversity of shops.
- Build on the assets we have such as: Garlic Fest, Irish Fest, Hemmings Motor News. We need to link onto those good things. They bring in thousands of people.
- Bring in a local sports team. SVC teams have gotten more exciting. Maybe we can have more of a partnership with them.

*One of the forums on
Community Visit Day*



VII. Bennington Community Visit Participants

Pat Adams	Sharyn Brush	Albert DeCiccio	Alberta Harrington	Mark Kevorkian
Leslie Addison	Joann Buczek	Thomas Dee	Michael Harrington	Dave King
Mark Anders	Abby Bull	Alisa Del Tufo	Roscoe Harrington	Joy Kitchell
Lindsey Anderson	Karen Burnell	Claude DeLucia	Beth Harris	Judy Kniffin
Sue Andrews	Hyacinthe Burnham	Aaron Dickie	Zak Harris	Tracy Knights
Randall Anselmo	Kim Bush	Kathleen Diehl	Robert Hartwell	Nell Koch
Amy Anselmo	Ileana Bushee	Mike DiMaio	Art and Claire Haytho	Lucinda Krautheim
Susan Armstrong	Lisa Byer DeAngelis	Tracy Dorman	John Hearst	Marty Krautheim
Lesley Arnold	Kelsey Calicchia	Liam Downey	Bruce Henderson	George Krawczyk
Donna Baker	Donald Campbell	Eileen Druckenmiller	Judith Hill	Joe Krawczyk
Gay Baker	Linda Campbell	Shelli Duboff	Heather Hinckley	Mary Jo Kwiatek
Mike Baker	Meg Campbell	Lee Dufresne	Susan Hoffman-Ogier	Kate Lalley
Douglass Ball	Tom Campbell	Betsy Dunham	Jennie Hogan	Delia Lane
David Ballou	Brian Campion	Valerie Dwyer	Christine Holdun	Paula LaPorte
Wendy Ballou	Catherine Canning	Lisa Eames Buchanan	Earle Hollings	Bruce Laumeister
Frank Barnes	Chelsea Carey	Jenn Eastman	Katrina Hollis	Lena Leake
Mike Barriere	Jim Carroll	Robert Ebert	Kiaran Honderich	Bruce Lee-Clark
Susan Beal	Melissa Chancey	Trenton Endres	Barry Horst	Mary Lee-Clark
Jenna Beaumont	Eva Chatterjee-Sutton	Steve Engle	Kathy Houran	Abe Lefebvre
Paul Becker	Lorna Cheriton	Joann Erenhouse	Cora May Howe	Kelley Legacy
Shannon Behan	Gail Cohen	Heather Faley	Bob Howe	Noreen Lenilko
Tiffany Belville	Howard Cohen	Judith Fellows	Jerrold Huguenot	Janice Lerrigo
Betsy Belvin	Paula Colbert	Sadie Fischesser	Tim Hunt	Melany Letourneau
Mark Benson	Liz Coleman	Dave Flight	Stuart Hurd	Greg Lewis
Celia Berks	Bill Colvin	Susan Fox	Tordis Ilg Isselhardt	Kitty Lewis
Chris Berks	Shelley Colvin	David and Lorraine Fredrickson	Karl Isselhardt	John Likakis
Barbara Bermudez	Sue Congdon	Auberta Galusha	Jack Isselhardt	Jana Lillie
Brooke Bishop	Ed Connelly	Danielle Garder	Rosemarie Jackowski	Jason Lillie
Dalton Blackwell	Jeanne Conner	Dimitri Garder	Edward E. Jaffe	Jessica Lillie
Jan Blaire	Tony Conner	Leonid Garder	Robin James	Mary Ellen Lindberg
Christine Bongartz	Katie Contrada	Sasha Garder	Jeannie Jenkins	Darlene Lockwood
John Bootle	Charles Copp	Natasha Garder Littrell	Gail Johnson	Bruce Lonergan
Lindy Bootle	Justin Corcoran	Chris Gauthier	Larry Johnson	Gabby Loomis
Bill and Ruth Botzow	Tim Corcoran, Jr.	Mary Gerisch	Kim Johnson-Turner	Steve Lorenz
Laura Boudreau	Tim Corcoran, Sr.	Charlie Gingo	Brenda Jones	Jessica Ludwig
Bethany Boulger	Lexey Covell	Mick Goldsmith	Deborah Kaplan Polivy, Ph.D.	Shelby Lyle
Gail Boulger	Joy Cox	Kevin Goodhue	Michael Keane	Lindy Lynch
Jim Boutin	Barb Croft	Tom Gorman	Rev W Kelley	Tom Lyons
Dick Bower	Rebecca Cross	Robin Greene	Jackie Kelly	Donna MacKenzie King
Michael Brady	James Culkeen	Karen Gross	Gerald Keneally	Baheeyah Madany
John Broderick	Janet Cunningham	Irene Hackett	Bruce Kennedy	Sue Maguire
Michele Brower	Joy Danila	Joyce Hall	Emily Kennedy	Denise Main
James D. Brown	Bain Davis	Sue Hall	Jamie Kennedy	Deana Mallory
William Brown II	Lois and Bill Davis	Kristina Hansen	Daryl Kenny	Dan Malmborg

Sandra Mangsen	Mary Morrissey	Eric & Deborah Peterson	Chris Sigsbury	Ryan Tobin
Kathi Marcoux	Cinda Morse	Michael Pichette	Amelia Silver	Steven Tofel
Stephanie Marine	Laurie Mulhern	Carolyn Plage	Miriam Silver	Hamilton Topping
Brian Maroney	Ray Mullineaux	Jenifer Prouty	Albert Skidmore	Karen Trubitt
Timothy Marr	Sheila Mullineaux	Charles Putney	Kendy Skidmore	Carol Tunney, MD
Charles Marsden	Charlie Murphy	Linda Putney	Seline Skoug	Polly van der Linde
Janet Marsden	Judy Murphy	Marsha Quackenbush	Emily Smith	Greg Van Houten
Jan Martin Bopp	Welthy Myers	Wendy Rae Woods	Janet Sobel	Patricia Vench
Bob Matteson	Adilla Norhaumi	Dawson Raspuzzi	Peter Sorensen	Terry Volz
Priscilla Maxon	K.D. Norris	Virginia Ray	Jonah Spivak	Bo Vukovic
Kim McCart	Jaime O'Neil	David Rees	Maryann St. John	Ann Wade
Catherine McClure	Abbie O'Neill	Tammie Reilly	Lauryn Starkie Kreuder	Kevin Wandrei
Stephen McClure	Peter Odierna	Brooke Remington	Matthew Starkie Kreuder	Pat Warner
Michael McDonough	Ellen Ogden	Samuel Restino	Nancy Jean Steffen	Charlene Webster
Shannon McGibney	Sean Marie Oller	Arnold Ricks	Keara Sternberg	Keith Whitcomb, Jr.
Howlett	Pat Palencsar	Kevin Robinson	T.J. Stimala	Gabriel White
Brian McKenna	Kara Pallman	Mark Rondeau	Daniel Stroh	Clover Whitham
Catherine McLure	Stephan Palmer	Stanley Rosen	Peter Stromgren	Matt Willey
Jeanne McWaters	T.R. Paquin	Jane Sobel	Robin Stromgren	Ellen Winitzer
Jim Menneto	Elsie Paris	Lee Russ	Sally Sugarman	Grace Winslow
Crae Messer	Matt Patterson	Rich Ryder	James Sullivan	Ed Woods
Patricia Gordon Michael	Sarah Peacock	Beth Sausville	Milt Surdam	Rob Woolmington
Erika Mijlin	David Pearson	Edie Sawitsky	Patty Surdam	Nancy Helene Wright
Donald Miller	Richard Pembroke, Sr.	D. Justine Scanlon	Sharron Sweet	Zeke Wright
Amanda Monks	Judith Pennock	Tracey Schwarz	Lynne Teker	Andrew Wu
Dan Monks	Matt Penny	Tim Scoggins	Jim Therrian	Dixie Zens
Robert Montgomery	Kristi Pepoon	David Scribner	Amy Thivierge	Michael Zhuraw
Anne Mook	Ned and Cally Perkins	Richard Sears	Jordan Thompson	Jay Zwynenburg
Wes Mook	Sarah Perrin	Jim Secor	Kathy Thompson	
Kiah Morris	Matt Perry	Susan Sgorboti	RC Tiffany	
Jason Morrissey	Marianne Peters	John Shannahan	Brittany Tilley	

Task Force Groups came together at the Resource Meeting on May 16th to begin framing their workplans.



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*Visiting team members with
 Community Visit Chair,
 Mike Brady (center)*





Top: Community Visit Day forums on March 15th
 Middle left: Community Visit Day pizza dinner
 Middle right and Bottom: Community Meeting Day on April 12th



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Front and back cover art: Tony Conner

Photos on inside pages: Margaret Gibson McCoy

Printing by Minuteman Press