

# Bennington Town Plan: Incorporating DEI Values

## BCRC recommendations, August 2023

1. An executive summary could be added that establishes a vision reflecting community consensus, prioritizes participatory governance, incorporates the town's Declaration of Inclusion, and commits the town to examining the inclusiveness and fairness of all policies established in the plan. Town plan policy should ask: What will the town need to embrace to meet the challenges of the future? What information will be needed, what technology will be necessary, and what skills will be required? For all new plan policies, ask the questions: What opportunities will the policy give rise to? How will it strengthen community? Who is being served and is anyone being left out or harmed?
2. The town has undertaken significant DEI efforts in recent years that should inform and be highlighted in the new plan. Although these efforts have been focused on racial injustice, diversity extends beyond race, ethnicity, and identity. A commitment to diversity reflects a commitment to all citizens and staff, prospective and existing. It reflects a commitment to the education and preparation of the town's young people to become healthy and participating members of the community – to become leaders in fulfilling and shaping community vision. It reflects a commitment to welcoming newcomers whose skills and efforts will be needed to meet future challenges.
3. The plan tends to base the importance of various policy objectives and goals almost exclusively on economic development. The basis of new policy should be broadened and reimagined as important to community wellbeing as well. Economic development is one aspect of community wellbeing. Town plan policies should reflect sustainability, resiliency, and equity. These values are intertwined, and the town plan must reflect that they are all vital to community success. Understanding that current and past strategies will not solve the challenges of the moment, an embrace of innovation must underlie the community's efforts to address current and future challenges.
4. The land use section should address how past policies have led to housing segregation by income and locating incompatible uses near marginalized communities. The transportation section should also examine how transportation policies have led to inequities among marginalized groups. The same question should be asked in the areas of public services and utilities. Moving forward, the plan should explore how town policy can be fashioned to overcome such inequities. New policies should be established accordingly.
5. The plan describes the role of various committees in the implementation of town policies. These include the Bennington Historic Preservation Commission, the Bennington Housing Authority, Local Emergency Planning Committee, the Library Board, the Planning Commission, and the Development Review Board among others. Other committees not currently mentioned in the plan should be added to the discussion including the Community Policing Advisory Review Board that the town has recently established to address DEI concerns in town services. How community members are recruited and appointed to these committees should be discussed. Education and outreach programming should have the goal of instilling a feeling of inclusion that encourages community members of all backgrounds to be involved in the town's governance. Accommodation for people with disabilities, working parents, those whose first language is not English, and other underserved groups should be considered when structuring meeting schedules and formats.

6. Reframe the discussion of housing to reflect that the nation's, Vermont's, and Bennington's current housing crisis is not just a reflection of the need for more affordable housing for lower income households, but that housing of all types needs to be built to restore a healthy housing market that meets the community's needs. The housing discussion should also address the increasing incidence of people experiencing homelessness and recognize that it is a result of a tight housing market, not only individual misfortune.
7. Homelessness is primarily a housing issue, and the town continues in its efforts to remove barriers to housing development of all types and price points. However, this can only offer a long-term fix for those experiencing homelessness in the community. The town plan must address the more immediate needs of homeless people in Bennington, including efforts currently underway.
8. Bennington households experience relatively high energy cost burdens. It is important the plan addresses the energy cost burdens faced by the people of Bennington, irrespective of socio-economic status. The plan should address household energy costs, and outline how the town can help residents achieve weatherization and incorporate more efficient electric systems and appliances in their homes, as well as lower transportation costs.
9. Just as the plan should address energy cost burdens, it should address health burdens faced by people in the Bennington community irrespective of socio-economic status. The plan should outline how town policy can support health for all community members and identify and address any health disparities among the population. This should include a look at physiologic, dental, mental health, and substance use metrics and treatment opportunities, as well as an examination of access to recreational opportunities that contribute to good health among community members.
10. Childcare is an impediment to inclusion and community involvement, as well as to employment for some and a vital regional economy. The plan gives very little attention to this issue. As this issue has taken on even greater importance at the state level, the new plan should address childcare services in a more comprehensive way.
11. Greater care should be taken, and attention given, to ensure the plan avoids assumptions. Improving the critical thinking skills of decision-makers will ensure that language throughout the plan is accurate and inclusive.
12. The plan makes multiple references to the problems of an aging workforce and declining population but does not discuss how to recruit and welcome newcomers and encourage young people to stay in the community. Accordingly, the plan should establish goals that enhance human capacity within the Bennington community by welcoming newcomers and providing education, training, and opportunity to those making up a diverse workforce. The importance of maintaining or expanding current levels of service will depend on a parallel program of recruitment and investment in town staff. Therefore, how the town will recruit and invest in its staff to provide town services should be discussed.
13. The section on resilience only addresses recovery of infrastructure needs after natural disasters. The section should be expanded to address human recovery and include agricultural recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic and recent flooding events could be a model for this expanded discussion of resilience. Furthermore, community resilience must be seen as linked to diversity, equity, inclusion, creativity, and innovation. A strong creative economy, including both arts and technology-oriented creativity, is as important

to resilience as our water, sewer and transportation infrastructure or our healthcare delivery systems.

14. The plan should identify green infrastructure as an important component of community wellbeing and establish policies to maintain, expand, and improve such assets in Bennington. Green infrastructure includes open spaces, tree canopy, rain gardens, and other such elements of the built and natural landscapes within the town.
15. The plan should reflect a stronger commitment to the complete streets concept, traffic calming, and access management so that those who do not have cars or choose not to use them are clearly being served by town transportation policy. Relatedly, how Green Mountain Express might be more accessible to commuters between Bennington and surrounding communities should be explored. Currently, the routes take too long to be feasible for most commuters, who must then rely on their cars to get back and forth to work. Bennington could advocate for such an express route to help meet stated energy goals.
16. The plan should address food insecurity among community members and Bennington's food system infrastructure. Farm to table programs and general increased access to fresh, local foods should be discussed. Policies aimed at strengthening the local agricultural economy will be a critical part of this.
17. As the world moves more deeply to digital economies, the connectivity to the digital world increasingly will shape an individual's or a group's ability to engage in economic, civic, and social spheres of life. The plan should acknowledge the broadband issues that result in a digital divide between certain populations of Bennington. This issue is also linked to Bennington's ability to be an innovative community, a community that keeps in step with societal developments, while at the same time finding ways to preserve the dimensions of its current culture.