



Town of Bennington

Communications Coordinator Report — February 14, 2022

After almost five months on the job...

I'm starting to feel much more comfortable with the relationships I've developed with the different town departments and with the collaborations and contacts that I have been cultivating throughout the community. I am inspired by the Rotarian 4-way test which ends with the question "Will it be beneficial to all concerned?" This guides me as I work to continue to build awareness about the work of the town and to improve communication and outreach throughout our community.

Citizen Outreach:

I've met with, emailed, messaged, or spoken with 17 citizens since my last report. Many of those are follow ups for ongoing issues. As I mentioned in my last report, some of these are simply not short term solutions and require ongoing engagement to ensure that we are doing all we can to stay on top of the problem. I am often impressed in these interactions by how much people care about our town and community. Even though their problem may be specific to them, it is often rooted in an overall desire to see the town do better as a whole.

Business Outreach:

I am developing an informal business advisory group that I can reach out to regarding issues that can affect the business community and to provide a direct line of communication for business people to be able to connect with the Town and I about emerging issues of concern. One idea that has emerged that I am following up on is to improve outreach to businesses that will be affected by major highway construction or infrastructure projects so that we can work together to minimize their impact.

Celebratory Events:

I have begun work on a commemoration for 65 years in business by Lauzon Machine located on East Main Street that will take place this coming May.

Facebook and Social Media:

Facebook is our primary social media outlet. This month we averaged almost 22,000 in our reach which is nearly double our usual average. This increase was driven primarily by interest in the Willow Park Playground redevelopment and continued strong interest in the followup post on the Rail Trail.

Riverwalk:

A number of Banner articles and the tragic first anniversary of the passing of Emily Hamann have helped to increase community awareness regarding the Riverwalk. A lot of progress has been made as a result of the year long effort and the hope is that these continuing improvements will be a lasting tribute to Emily's memory.

Website Update:

The RFP for the Town website redevelopment was sent out January 6, and closed on January 31. We received 21 proposals and have reviewed them all and narrowed down the proposals to four strong possibilities. I'll be checking references on those four vendors and then will schedule interviews. A decision on the final vendor is expected by the end of the month of February.

Community Newsletter:

A first issue of the new bi-monthly Community Newsletter was printed and distributed in early January. We are grateful to the Bennington Banner for this collaboration! We are working with them to continue to improve the newsletter as we move forward. A new issue is planned for March.

Cyber Security / IT:

The IT/Security team has been meeting regularly to continue to improve security at the town. We are currently working on improving our overall security policies and implementing best practices.

250th Planning:

I am pleased to report that 250th planning at the Federal level is starting to gather steam. As one of the three Vermont 250 representatives at the table I continue to work to keep Vermont and our efforts on the radar screen at the national level. Our Vermont 250th Commission has also met recently and I am very proud to be the one representative from Southern Vermont, and even happier that I have heard that I will soon be joined by another new commissioner from South Western Vermont. I will be able to share that name publicly once the state makes the appointment public, but I can safely say that everyone will be pleased by their choice. The focus of VT250 is currently on developing a strategic plan for the celebrations and planning a series of outreach meetings to all regions of Vermont.

On a very local level, I am continuing work with a team of dedicated volunteers, historians, and reenactors (living historians) to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the "Incident of Remember Baker's Thumb." The date of the anniversary is March 21, 2022, and an additional event to honor the anniversary is being planned for the early summer.

Press and Community Outreach:

In addition to the collaboration with the Banner on the Community Newsletter, I spend a lot of time writing press releases and helping reporters from different media get answers to their questions. There is a lot to tell about what is doing on in the town!

In addition, Shannon Barsotti and I have been continuing the ongoing effort of reaching out to community groups with a presentation about our town that includes a bit about history, our infrastructure, our different departments, and to solicit input back so that we can continue to improve our efforts overall. This past month Shannon and I presented together to the Bennington Rotary Club, and I did a solo presentation to the Catamount Rotary (yes we have two Rotaries in town!). Some elements of this community presentation will also be a part of our Town presentation at our upcoming Town Meeting.

Organizational Collaboration:

I have been broadening my organizational collaborations to include more organizations serving the most disadvantaged part of our population. That includes outreach to GBICs, Sunrise Family Center, and continuing work developing a collaborative relationship with the Bennington County Coalition for the Homeless. I will be attending the "Continuum of Care" meeting this Friday which is a consortium of many of the social services organizations in the community and I look forward to working with that group.

ARPA Project Priorities:

An important focus this past month has been around outreach for the ARPA funding priorities. One thing we learned was that our effort to categorize projects using "Tiers" to indicate a projects eligibility for ARPA funding created confusion in the community who mistook those tiers as a ranking of the merits of the projects. Moving forward, we suggest that we group the projects under CURRENT ARPA PROJECTS as those we are currently pursuing AND, if feasible, may expend ARPA funds upon; and ON DECK for all other projects that are not actively being considered for ARPA funds expenditure at this time. Work on the "on deck" projects may be ongoing, but currently the expenditure of ARPA funds is not actively being considered.

134 public comments were received on the Draft Priority List and those comments have all been reviewed and incorporated into the projects under consideration with some in our current ARPA projects category and others "on deck."

Safety and Equity:

I've been heavily involved in a staffing capacity with the work of the Safety and Equity task force. This month they presented the final report of their work to the select board and a system of public comment has been implemented that will continue through March 7. There will be a public presentation by the task force on February 21.