



Town of Bennington

Communications Coordinator Report — November 21, 2021

After two months on the job,

I am starting to get much more comfortable as part of the town team. I've now met with all department heads and have developed a working relationship that is still evolving in a productive way. I have toured the town's facilities and now have a much greater understanding of the amazing infrastructure and systems that underlay our town of just over 16,000 people.

Citizen Outreach:

I've met with, emailed, messaged, or spoken with 15 citizens on a wide variety of concerns or questions. While seemingly granular, these individual connections can have long term benefits as we attempt to win over the hearts and minds of our citizens one at a time. For example, a recent complaint via facebook ended with the citizen becoming involved with our ongoing website development and the suggestion of a "fix it and Comment" form at benningtonvt.org/fix-it/.

Business Outreach:

I've stopped by or emailed with the following businesses to hear their concerns or ideas: Knapps, Main Street Antiques, and The Beyond Gallery.

Non-Profits and Community Groups:

I've met or communicated with the BPD, Bennington Rotary, SVSU, the Shires of VT DMO, and the BBC this past month. The ribbon cutting for the Orchard Village – Willowbrook Pathway was a success and enjoyed lovely weather. I am currently planning another Unveiling Ceremony with 219 Pleasant St. LLC that will occur in December.

Facebook and Social Media:

We continue to work hard on providing timely information to the public via our social media account on Facebook. In the past month, we have had a post reach of 20,289, and post engagement of 5,919. The number of people "liking" our page continues to slowly grow with another 31 added this past month. A positive example of being proactive with information was during the MAUHS lockdown, where timely information from Chief Doucette allowed us to post info quickly to the community and head off some exaggerated claims that had already begun to circulate.

Riverwalk:

Following the tragic murder of Emily Hamann, a collaborative group has been meeting to address issues around the riverwalk. I was invited to the last Riverwalk Interfaith meeting on November 1st by Michael Wajda, who worked with me on the A.T. Community designation effort.

At that meeting I offered to help with a press release. Doing the background on that release drew me into conversations with Michael McDonough, who mentioned the BBC Design Committee's long range planning work they were doing on the pathway, much of which was informed by initial meetings of the walkway that the BBC was involved in.

Further, conversation with Dan alerted me to discussions regarding towns plans for work on the pathway. It was also at that meeting that Susan Armstrong attended, with a neighbors perspective.

Add to the mix, there is activity at the bank of Bennington regarding lighting, cameras, etc., and folks would like an update on where that stands and what future plans there might be.

And finally, at the town Manager's meeting when I mentioned that I had attended the Riverwalk meeting and was seeing numerous threads of different efforts, Chief Doucette said that he had input and would like to loop back into the discussion.

As a result of all that it seemed that with so many threads out there the timing was right to get everyone back on the same page to sit together again to review where everything stands and what future plans are being developed in order to coordinate our efforts. Thus the initial idea of simply writing a press release morphed into a push for the group to gather everyone together again for this conversation which will occur on December 6.

2021 Bennington Survey:

The survey results are being tabulated now and will be shared as a presentation at the Select Board meeting. A PDF of the presentation will be made available to the public after the presentation, and a copy will be included in your packet if timing allows.

Website Update:

Work continues on planning for the town website update. The scope of this work is large, and the development of the plan for the redesign is the first step for preparing an RFP for the work to be done.

While we will be using a vendor for much of the work, I feel strongly that I need to use my 20+ years of website development to take the lead on key changes around how the navigation system should work, how to reorganize information into "buckets" that correspond with what we know about user behavior on the website, by providing guidance on overall design, and by doing research into best practices by other municipal websites.

Likewise how well we prepare our materials for the vendor makes a big difference on the final cost of the project. I believe I will be able to reduce costs on the front end as a result.

Improving the websites ADA compatibility is a primary issue and will be one of the larger tasks for the final vendor in addition to a widespread update of content across all departments.

While it's premature to discuss final costs for the redevelopment, I am confident that those costs will be well below the budgeted amount as many of the aforementioned efforts will result in efficiencies that will keep the website development costs down.

I will provide additional information on progress in my December report.

Community Newsletter:

We are implementing a partnership with the Bennington Banner to create a more robust Community Newsletter. I meet with Susan Plaisance and Susan Allen from the Banner, and Carrie Fabricius from the Senior Center about doing a revamped version of the Community NL both digitally and in print to the entire Banner readership, with inclusion of Bennington Community Center (Rec. center) info, and a services directory that would not be limited by endorsement issues that the Town must abide by to create the sort of expanded Community news that will be useful to seniors as well as adult citizens in general, with a targeted start date of this coming January.

This will save work for Carrie, expand exposure, fill that need for service listings that we can't promote ourselves, and include a larger part of the adult community, and hopefully be useful for new residents as well as I often hear about that as an issue. A list of services created by Beth Wallace and used by the Welcome Wagon has been included in this, along

with the town services list we currently show.

In addition to being in print, with an overrun of 500 to start to be placed at the senior center and Community Center (rec center), there will be a digital versions that we can deploy using our community email list that has about 500 folks on it. This will also replace the cost of us having to mail as many copies as many people will now get them via the newspaper. Or at least we think so!

As a next step, we will be reviewing some design samples from the banner in the next few weeks.

Cyber Security / IT:

The town has seen an increasing number of phishing attempts over the past month. We have instituted an internal educational campaign on how to spot and avoid phishing attacks with a series of weekly emails that show the current techniques being used against us to increase awareness and hopefully avoid a successful attack.

I was also part of an ongoing effort with Skip and Melissa to continue to work on our overall cyber security. A recent security audit by a Dominion, a cyber security consulting firm, was reviewed by our team and with our primary IT firm RCS consulting. A number of suggestions are being followed up on, and overall we are doing OK with our security. Having said that... cyber security is an ongoing and ever-changing landscape that requires constant attention and due diligence.

250th Planning:

I have been active on both the state, federal, and regional 250th commemoration teams. At the state level we are primarily focused on crafting the vision and mission of the commission, and planning a first round of outreach to regions in the state. I would like Bennington County to be the model on which outreaches statewide are based. A tentative date of January 2022 has been identified as a possible start for a Bennington 250th Committee to be created to interface with the state and federal commissions.

Outreach by the numbers:

Looking at my calendar and email for the last month, here are some stats for you...

Number of FB Posts - 36

Number of emails sent - 530+/-

Number of meetings attended - 21