

RR Ave Revitalization Update Meeting November 16, 2010

Participants

George Tyler, Elaine Sopchak, Tony Morgan, Greg Morgan, Diane Clemens, Bridget Meyer, Jen Bostwick, Cathy Shearer, Chris Kenny, Tim Jerman, Lori Ernst Houghton, Ken O'Connell, Jaye O'Connell, Diane Fuchs, Christopher Halpin, Nick Meyer, Susan McCormack

Discussion Highlights

The group discussed the six recommendations made to the Village Trustees following last February's All Aboard for Downtown Essex Junction forum. The group agreed that in some areas we have made amazing progress. The citizen led initiatives such as the Farmers Market, Railroad Avenue Recess, and the work of the Village Planters have been especially successful.

There are concerns about being able to sustain the level of energy and activity needed to continue to improve our historic downtown. The group discussed ways to work effectively with village officials to continue to have the needed support to keep these revitalization efforts going.

In addition, there was discussion about the proposed Park Street development. Meeting participants believe that a strong, cohesive vision is needed for the village so that new development and the revitalization of the historic core will both succeed.

There are several openings for village trustee and the group recognizes that it is an important moment for the village to have strong trustees and leadership in order to take advantage of the positive momentum of this group, the potential of the Park Street project, as well as the many other positive assets the village has to work with and build upon.

Next Steps

1. Provide an update to the community via the Essex Reporter about RR Ave Revitalization efforts. (Sue McCormack, Chris Kenny)
2. Promote interest in the open trustee positions (Lori Ernst, Bridget Meyer, Cathy Shearer)
 - Host community meeting to provide information about running for and serving as a village trustee*
 - Develop a communications plan to raise awareness about the upcoming open trustee positions and to encourage people to run and/or vote
3. Revisit the possibility of an appropriation for pathway by RR Tracks (Greg Morgan, Jaye O'Connell)

*This forum has been scheduled!

When: January 20th

Where: Kolvoord Room, Library

Speakers confirmed: George Tyler, Tim Jerman, Linda Waite-Simpson

EJ Railroad Avenue Revitalization Project

Summary of December 10, 2009 Steering Committee Meeting

Participants: George Tyler, Diane Clemens, Bridget Meyer, Dave Crawford, Susanna Olson, Jaye O'Connell, Chris Halpin, Greg Martin, Scott Evans, Lisa Torchiano, Chris Kenny, Susan McCormack

1. Updates

- Amtrak is going to be investing money in some improvements to the train station this summer (i.e. fixing the roof, fixing up the platform, changing the bathroom so it is handicap accessible). They seem to be on a tight timeline for design/build bids, but Dave Crawford is working to identify the key players to see if the EJ community can have some say in what happens.
- There is now a Downtown Essex Junction fan page on facebook. Will announce this to folks in next update.
- Chris Halpin is working with John Ferris, a journalism teacher at Essex High School to suggest that RR Ave Revitalization be the subject of a semester long "convergence journalism" project.
- Chris Kenny's proposal to Leadership Champlain was accepted and we will know by mid-January whether a Leadership Champlain team will lend their expertise to help with the RR Ave Revitalization project.
- There will be an interactive exhibit to envision the future of downtown EJ in the Kolvoord Rm of the Brownell Library during the month of January. The comments/ideas will be used to help inform the content of the February forum

2. February Forum

- Food
 - Committee would like to offer dinner at beginning of forum. Dessert will be served during a break in the middle of the meeting.
 - We have volunteers who have offered to bring food (dessert?)
 - EJHS Tech Center will be approached re: their availability/cost of dinner
 - Potential funding sources for meal – Chris Halpin offered to contact some of these folks
 - Chamber of Commerce
 - Todd Investment Company
 - Block party committee – Bridget to contact
 - Tom O'Brien (Murray's)
 - Price Chopper (may supply paper goods)
- Facilitators
 - Sue will train community volunteers to facilitate the small group discussion portions of the forum during the MLK day of service that CHIPS is sponsoring on January 18
- Child Care
 - Greg Martin agreed to reach out to Val Smith to see if she can identify some students who could provide child care. If this works, we should create an opportunity for children to do a visioning activity re: Essex Junction

- Snow date
 - Group agreed we should have a snow date. [note: Patty checked with the High School and February 17 is available. She will reserve the date]
- Marketing
 - Created a marketing strategy [note: to be forwarded to committee soon]
 - Will continue to distribute Save the Date postcard. Rest of marketing plan will be implemented after January 18.
 - **Committee members** will come to January meeting with the name of at least one new resident and several long term residents to add to list of folks we will call and invite
 - Greg Martin will research e-vite possibilities

3. Next Steering Committee meeting is Thursday, January 7, 4 – 6 pm in Kolvoord Room of Brownell Library.

EJ Railroad Avenue Revitalization Project

Summary of November 12, 2009 Steering Committee Meeting

Participants: George Tyler, Diane Clemens, Bridget Meyer, Dave Crawford, Robin Pierce, Susanna Olson, Jaye O'Connell, Chris Halpin, Greg Martin, Duncan Harvey, Scott Evans, Elaine Sopchak, John Alden, Susan McCormack

1. Discussed February 10 Public Forum

- Discussed the scope of what will be addressed. While there are some advantages to having a broad conversation about the “historic downtown” or the village as a whole (i.e. there are lots of activities happening and we want to make sure things connect with each other in a rational way), the committee decided to focus on RR Avenue and the Brownell Block of Main Street for several reasons:
 - citizen concerns about this specific part of town provided the initial impetus for the project;
 - this area is highly visible and there is a sense of urgency (empty storefronts, safety issues for neighbors, etc.)
 - being able to show success in a targeted area can lead to support for broader efforts;
 - the information gathered at the forum can also inform decisions about the village as a whole.
- Committee members agreed to send suggestions for a name for the February forum and the Committee will vote on a name by the end of the month. **[note: this has happened – forum name is “All Aboard for Downtown Essex Junction”]**
- Identified key audience members for the forum
 - Youth
 - Business owners and landlords
 - Train enthusiasts
 - Artists/Essex Art League
 - Long time residents
 - Newer residents (Countryside)
 - Faith Community
 - School Community (parents/teachers)

2. Outreach to business community

- Elaine Sopchak gave an overview of previous efforts to reach out to business owners. Many business owners prefer to be left alone and this seems to be true whether they are doing well or badly.
 - Some business are interested in doing some joint advertising with the village
 - Many aren't interested in participating in community events
 - Currently, an intern is reaching out to businesses to learn more about their interests and needs

- Committee agreed that it is important to continue to reach out to business owners and landlords, even if this is challenging. Committee members have volunteered to contact current business owners/landlords on RR Ave and Main Street and invite them to attend the February forum. We will finalize the outreach plan during the December meeting
- Talking points are needed to make a compelling case for businesses to participate. Some initial ideas for talking points
 - Efforts currently underway to revitalize this part of town
 - Area clean-up in spring – improve the site where their business/building is
 - Event series being planned to increase pedestrian traffic
 - Forum in February to continue to work on these efforts and discuss other ideas (i.e. increasing green space, using the arts to revitalize the area, transition to housing/offices, changing zoning and regulations)
 - Important to hear their ideas about what will work
 - There is community momentum and if they aren't at the table they won't have a say in what kinds of changes are taking place [note: in addition to significant grassroots community participation, the Vermont Council on Rural Development is helping put on the forum, and the RR Ave Revitalization effort may be receiving assistance this spring from a Leadership Champlain project team]

3. Next Steering Committee meeting is Thursday, December 10, 4 – 6 pm in Kolvoord Room of Brownell Library. Agenda items include

- Finalize details/plan logistics for February forum
- Create plan for outreach to key forum participants/business community
- Get update from Railroad Works Committee about their efforts

EJ Railroad Avenue Revitalization Project

Summary of October 1, 2009 Steering Committee Meeting

Participants: George Tyler, Deb Billado, Diane Clemens, Tim Jerman, Bridget Meyer, Nick Meyer, Dave Crawford, Robin Pierce, Susanna Olson, Jaye O'Connell, Chris Halpin, Susan McCormack

1. Noelle Mackay, Executive Director of Smart Growth VT met with the committee

- Advice
 - Essential to have a strong champion for revitalization
 - When creating zoning/building standards, begin with the vision in mind. (How will the regulations help achieve the vision. Think long term about potential multiple purposes for buildings and infrastructure over time)
 - Developers are looking for certainty and clarity in regulations
 - Use visual images to help people imagine the future they want to see (show people pictures of local building – ask which ones they like and why)
 - Actively seek out and invite the kinds of businesses you want to attract
 - Important to have green space/parks right in downtown area so people feel comfortable in and are attracted to dense development
 - Engage HS talent
 - Encourage holistic thinking, but begin with a specific project (housing, business, pedestrian and bike linkages, think beyond business hours to what happens during a whole day)
 - EJ has lots of development and redevelopment opportunity and good water and sewer (important assets that are attractive to developers)
 - Consider establishing incubator space
- Resources
 - Preservation Trust of VT
 - AARP (transporting the public work)
 - Non-profit developers
 - Non-profit housing (Housing VT, Champlain Housing Trust)
 - Gary Fulmanhoff (sp?), UVM (green tax)
 - Smart Growth VT (help with crafting planning policies/regulations, online tools)
 - State downtown program
 - November 6 downtown conference in Middlebury
 - Lee Krohn, village of Manchester, implemented good process for establishing design guidelines
 - Local Motion
- Success stories
 - Bristol
 - Vergennes
 - Brandon
 - Bellows Falls
 - Bennington
 - Proctor

2. Key challenge identified by the steering committee is to get landlords and business owners to the table. Past efforts to do this have not been successful.

3. Steering Committee mapped out current and upcoming efforts around the themes from the June 2008 Central Street Forum (see below)

4. Next Steps

- Continue to make progress on short term activities (see highlighted areas below for tasks and people responsible)
- Identify important stakeholders for revitalization efforts and create a strategy for reaching out to these folks (November steering committee meeting)
- Invite the June forum participants and village residents to participate in revitalization efforts and February community forum (survey and individual invitations)

EJ Railroad Avenue Revitalization Project Current & Upcoming Activities

Economic Development

1. Promote train travel
 - Flyer announcing special fare (Susanna, Railroad works committee)
 - Stuck in VT video (Railroad works committee)
2. Advocate for upgrades to rail infrastructure
 - Ongoing outreach to state and other partners (Dave, village manager)
 - Letter writing campaign to legislators (Jaye, Railroad works committee)
3. Town economic development research will include village center (Town of Essex)
4. Planning commission considering zoning changes to encourage high density development (Village planning commission)
5. Village has contacted Housing Vermont and Champlain Housing Trust regarding affordable housing. We have looked at possible small park locations in the 5 Corners area, referred someone who is considering opening a small restaurant to the people at Claires for advice on the methods they used to get their business up and running, and offered suggestions on possible locations for the restaurant. We have also discussed enlarging the designed Village Center to include the Post Office Square area to increase the potential for investment and tax credits. (Robin, village development director)

Beautification

1. Fall planting in garden near stations (Jaye, Railroad works committee/Central Street neighborhood watch)
2. Short term upgrades to station
 - Dave is laying groundwork by writing letter to the station owners and talking with Technical Center about students building benches, etc.
 - Form volunteer group to complete work in spring 2010 (Railroad Avenue Revitalization Steering Committee)
3. Scarecrow contest with travel theme in the neighborhoods (consider postponing until next year)
4. [Natural playground at Summit Street School (separate but potentially related effort)]

Railroad Avenue Events

1. Create train themed displays/events on Railroad Avenue to coincide with tree lighting ceremony and the holidays.
 - Dave and Deb Billado to reach out to landlords and get permissions by October 27
 - Railroad works committee to solicit volunteers to display trains/train related art.
2. Convene a meeting to begin planning for an event series on Railroad Avenue (Bridget Meyers, Chris Halpin)

Communication & Collaboration

1. Monthly updates to FPF and June forum participants
2. Survey June forum participants to solicit volunteers (Sue)
3. Develop outreach strategy for landlords, business owners, and other important stakeholders (Railroad Avenue Revitalization Steering Committee)
4. Develop ideas for volunteer recognition (Susanna)
5. Envisioning the future of EJ activity – idea wall at library (Bridget, George)