

# ALL ABOARD FOR DOWNTOWN ESSEX JUNCTION

---

A BRIEFING AND PROPOSAL OF  
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TRUSTEES  
OF THE VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION



Submitted for consideration by the  
Railroad Avenue Revitalization Project Steering Committee

March 11, 2010

# ALL ABOARD FOR DOWNTOWN ESSEX JUNCTION - THE FORUM

THE COMMUNITY RESPONDS TO SAVE ITS HISTORIC VILLAGE CENTER

---

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

On February 10, 2010, the Railroad Avenue Revitalization Project Steering Committee (RARPSC), Railroad Works Committee, and the Essex Junction Village Government came together to host ***“All Aboard For Essex Junction – a Public Forum on the Revitalization of Railroad Avenue and Main Street.”*** Over 120 community members (from a broad range of ages) attended the intensive four-hour event held at Essex High School. The Forum was a sequel to a smaller initial Forum hosted by the Steering Committee in June of 2009. In response to the collaborative efforts of all participants, the RARPSC respectfully submits the following six recommendations for consideration by the Village’s Board of Trustees. Each received strong support at the Forum, and there is considerable energy and talent among the citizens of this wonderful municipality – people who are interested and committed to working with Village Government in these efforts. The recommendations are listed below, with details to follow:

- Develop and Support a Railroad Avenue Event Series, to include a Farmer’s Market.
- Renovate the Train Station.
- Create/Enhance Green Spaces in the Downtown Core.
- Develop and Maintain a Marketing and Communications Plan for Essex Junction.
- Develop implementation plans for responding to Traffic, Parking, and Pedestrian needs.
- Analyze and Update the Village’s Commercial Zoning Regulations.

---

## A CLOSER LOOK AT THE FEBRUARY 10<sup>TH</sup> PUBLIC FORUM

---

Led by the energy and input received from the community in the first Public Forum in June of 2009, the RARPSC identified four key action areas to focus its efforts on: **Economic Development, Beautification, Railroad Avenue Events, and Communication & Collaboration.** Their efforts since last summer have been focused on achieving developments in each of these areas from a grassroots level. With the support of Village Government, the RARPSC staged its eagerly anticipated follow-up Public Forum on February 10, 2010, at Essex High School, from 5:30 to 9:30 pm. There were three specific goals that the Steering Committee used to guide the structure of the four-hour event –

1. Establish a shared community vision for Railroad Avenue and Main Street, Essex Junction.
2. Prioritize strategies for moving forward.
3. Engage participants in the implementation of several short term revitalization projects.

At the Public Forum, there was considerable attention paid to potential strategies and projects that could help the citizens of Essex Junction achieve their vision for a healthy and vital downtown. Project ideas that were addressed that evening included:

- The feasibility of increasing green space in downtown Essex Junction by adding planting areas, and creating one or more “pocket parks” in the historic center of the Village.
- Revitalizing the Village’s train station, and setting a plan for re-energizing the legacy of trains and transportation as an identifiable branding initiative for the Village.
- Developing a business plan to create and launch a Railroad Avenue Events Series.
- Developing a plan and identifying potential resources to utilize the arts as a strategy for assisting in the revitalization of downtown.
- Developing a strategy and action plan for suggesting changes to zoning and regulatory changes for local government – changes that would help to promote a revitalized downtown district.

The format of the event was well designed and kept participants busy! Facilitated by Paul Costello, Executive Director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development, the forum began with a delicious dinner, generously sponsored by Martone’s Market and Central Beverage. An overflowing table of tasty homemade desserts was made possible by the contributions of the attendees themselves – certainly symbolic of the close-knit sense of community that people enjoy here in the Village. After opening remarks by Costello and Steering Committee member Jaye O’Connell, attendees were randomly divided into small groups (achieved with a numbering system activated when a person checked in at the door), with a trained facilitator placed at each table. The first small group discussion session was titled “**Establish Our Vision For Railroad Avenue and Main Street,**” and was followed up with Costello giving each group an opportunity to share their points of emphasis with the entire gathering. Then, the small groups went right back to work, this time on the topic of “**What Strategies Will Help Us Achieve Our Vision?**” Again, it was followed with small group reporting to the gathering, facilitated by Costello.

Armed and energized by all of the brainstorming and idea sharing, attendees were then asked to vote on the emerging themes of the evening, setting a priority order of sorts for the Revitalization Strategies. The most popular strategies are directly reflected in the list of recommendations this document provides for the Trustees. The evening concluded with attendees gathering in topic-specific groups, discussing ways to “**Make It Happen,**” in terms of achieving the desired goals that were just prioritized. At the same time, there were presentations featuring artists’ depictions of concepts for structural changes, street and pedestrian path redesign, and other ideas/feedback on the downtown area that were gathered at Brownell Library during the month of January.

#### ***WHAT THEY WERE SAYING AT THE FORUM...***

*“I was so encouraged by the turnout and enthusiastic participation of everyone, from early teens to senior citizens.”*

*“The community energy was inspiring”*

*“I can’t wait to help”*

---

## THE RECOMMENDATIONS

---

### ***Develop and Support a Railroad Avenue Event Series, to include a Farmer's Market.***

As was mentioned earlier, there is considerable citizen interest in working with Village Government to achieve this goal. In fact, there has been substantial work already done in creating a Farmer's Market for Railroad Avenue. We would like to see the Village Government act as a series co-sponsor, by coordinating street closures with the Essex Police and Village Public Works Departments, and holding liability insurance as the host site for events. In the future, we would like to see the Village pursue grant funding that could generate the necessary financial resources to enhance and expand the Events Series, as well as invest in a large event tent - or negotiate a multiple use agreement with a vendor like Vermont Tent Company - to remove inclement weather conditions as a threat for some events.

### ***Renovate the Train Station.***

There have been some encouraging signs around this project lately – one that many see as critical to radically changing the look and feel of downtown. There are ongoing discussions and developments involving NECR, CCTA, and Village Government that are well timed with this recommendation. We ask the Trustees to earnestly work with all stakeholders connected to this facility to identify mutual interests and potential resources, and begin the process of physically renovating the Train Station. Village Government has to be the hub of connectivity in this venture – we have the most to gain from improvement of this property, and the ability to cultivate the relationships to make it happen. We ask that short term improvements get underway as soon as possible (and the community is interested in assisting), but respectfully request that it not be at the expense of long-term renovation plans. Ultimately, the goal would be a complete exterior renovation of the station, creating a proud focal point for the Village and a direct connection to the rich railroad history and identity of Essex Junction. Total success would see the station have some interior renovation/addition (second story?) that would create a new public space (like a coffee shop, art gallery, meeting space, etc.) and would enhance public interest and pedestrian traffic.

### ***Create/Enhance Green Spaces in the Downtown Core.***

We recommend that the Development Director create a topographical map of the downtown area, identifying all locations where there could be opportunities for green space development and beautification. Further, we ask the Trustees and Village Government to provide some staff time for the Development Director to meet with community volunteers and help plan beautification activities for the Spring and Summer of 2010, as well as whatever resources the Village can spare for the purchase of plant materials, etc. The beautification plan should include flowering trees (naming opportunities for donors?) and other enhancements (community signboards, clock, etc.), as well as a plan to provide maintenance of the newly created green spaces. We would encourage longer range planning and study of the feasibility of creating one or more “pocket parks” in the downtown core, considering potential multiple uses of the park space (i.e., Farmer's Market, outdoor performances, etc.) during the design phase.

***Develop and Maintain a Marketing and Communications Plan for Essex Junction.***

We see this recommendation as essential to the success of all of the others – the Village needs an effective, interactive marketing and communications plan in order to keep the revitalization excitement and momentum rolling, as well as to draw attention and keep citizens informed on improvements and attractions in the Village Core...eventually drawing new businesses to this vibrant downtown! Leadership Champlain’s project team is actively working on a comprehensive marketing and communications strategy for Village Government to consider, with a delivery date in early June, 2010. We anticipate that Village Government will begin review and implementation soon after receipt, with a plan for whom on staff (or outside vendor) would be responsible for maintaining the website and managing the social media/electronic communications system.

***Develop implementation plans for responding to Traffic, Parking, and Pedestrian needs.***

Development Director Robin Pierce has developed exciting plans for facilitating pedestrian and automobile traffic, both in the Crescent Connector Project (Phase I and II) between Maple and Park Streets, and the Pedestrian Path connecting Central Street with North Street. We ask the Village Government to continue refining the plan and gathering public input on the projects, as well as seeking the necessary resources and vital commercial interest/investment to implement the plan.

***Analyze and Update the Village’s Commercial Zoning Regulations.***

It is obvious that the current condition and use of some of the downtown area’s commercial properties has impeded revitalization efforts in the Village Center. Current municipal zoning regulations do not allow the Village Government much leverage in terms of setting more strict condition and use codes, with the ability to penalize non-conforming property owners. We ask that the Village Government gather information on zoning regulations from other area municipalities that have had greater success in controlling these issues in their downtown areas. Once the research phase is concluded, we ask that the Village Government work to implement the necessary zoning and regulatory changes that will “incentivize” negligent property owners.

---

**IN CONCLUSION**

---

The RARPSC is sincerely appreciative of the support, openness, and involvement that the group has received from Village Government since its inception many months ago. And while last month’s Public Forum may have felt like a culminating event, it was – in reality – just the beginning, and there are now many stakeholders willing and able to share time, talent, and treasure to move this effort forward. The revitalization of this historically significant downtown is critical to the Village’s future, and will take continued energy, attention, and determination. The goals are achievable, and with a sustained collaborative effort between local government, community, and business, we know we can make a dramatic difference in our beloved Village that will impact quality of life for everyone...now, and well into the future.

Thank you very much for your consideration of these recommendations.

---

## ADDENDUM

---

1. Ranking of action topics, voted on at the February 10<sup>th</sup> Public Form
2. Results of internet-based public survey, hosted by Survey Monkey. Please note that the sample size that generated these results is only 39 respondents. More accurate statistical data is reflected in the results from the Public Forum.

### RANKING OF DISCUSSION TOPICS, VOTED ON AT THE FEBRUARY 10<sup>TH</sup> PUBLIC FORUM

Ranking	Large Group Vote	Discussion Groups	Follow-up Survey
1	Event Series	Event Series	Event Series
2	Parks & Green Space	Renovate Train Station	Renovate Train Station
3	Renovate Train Station	Parks & Green Space Restaurants & Shops	Restaurants & Shops
4	Marketing EJ	Update Zoning	Parks & Green Space
5	Parking, Pedestrians & Traffic	Marketing EJ	Parking, Pedestrians & Traffic
6	Restaurants & Shops	Transition to Housing	Marketing EJ
7	Update Zoning		Update Zoning Multi-model transportation hub
8	Support EJ businesses		Arts
9	Multi model Transportation Center		Transition to housing
10	Transition to Housing/offices		Support EJ businesses
11	Arts		

ALL ABOARD FOR DOWNTOWN ESSEX JUNCTION PUBLIC FORUM FOLLOW-UP SURVEY  
HOSTED BY SURVEY MONKEY – SAMPLE SIZE = 39

1. Please rate the forum.

Excellent - **56.8%** (21)

Good - **35.1%** (13)

Fair - **8.1%** (3)

Poor - **0.0%** (0)

*Did not answer* - 2

2. From the list below, choose your TOP TWO strategies for revitalizing RR Ave. & Main Street.

Have fun together/Create an events series: **43.6%** (17)

Renovate the train station: **33.3%** (13)

Add restaurants & shops: **30.8%** (12)

Add parks & green space: **28.2%** (11)

Manage traffic flow throughout the Village: **20.5%** (8)

Build multi-modal transportation hub: **12.8%** (5)

Market and brand Essex Junction (include social media): **12.8%** (5)

Update zoning and regulations: **12.8%** (5)

Create change through the arts: **5.1%** (2)

Add parking: **2.6%** (1)

Support EJ businesses (offer incentives & create village business association): **2.6%** (1)

Transition to housing and/or offices: **2.6%** (1)

Create signage re: parking and points of interest: **0.0%** (0)

---

**THE RAILROAD AVENUE REVITALIZATION PROJECT  
STEERING COMMITTEE**

---

John Alden

Deb Billado

Diane Clemens

Dave Crawford

Scott Evans

Chris Halpin

Duncan Harvey

Chris Kenny

Gregory Martin

Susan McCormack

Bridget Meyer

Jaye O'Connell

Susanna Olson

Robin Pierce

Lisa Torchiano

George Tyler