

Woodstock Community Visit 12-Year Review

Monday May 21, 2018

Woodstock Town Hall

Overview of the 2006 Community Visit Process & Action Priorities

Defining Community Identity

The Task Force on Community Identity met bi-weekly to build a vision and an action plan, and surveyed the public. Over time, it held a series of forums and led efforts in areas including agriculture, economy, history, tourism and the arts. It spawned later efforts including a subcommittee of the chamber of commerce which worked with Townsend Belisle on tourism issues and developed the star logo which has been adopted by the chamber. The 'Being Green' group worked with the UU Church "Sustainable Woodstock" group to help frame and energize it as a community non-profit organization which continues many of the discussions from the VCRD visit.

Conservation and Developing Walking and Biking Trails

The Conservation and Walking and Biking Trails Task Force met regularly for two years. It established a "Walk Woodstock Day" and built a "Walk Woodstock" trail map. It had successes in developing trails along Route 12 and around the National Park. Some of its ideas, like developing a bike path to the high school, met significant challenges around property rights of way and are no longer active. Meanwhile the Woodstock Area Mountain Bike Association has really taken off and has developed, mapped and popularized many trails through the area.

East End Development

The committee was originally frustrated and hit a number of walls but the issue and direction persisted. Eventually Sustainable Woodstock formed ~~an economic development commission~~, a futures group, which took on efforts around the east end. It started with moving the snow dump from a valuable place on the riverfront where the group created a new park. There were workdays with volunteers who now feel a sense of ownership. They also developed a new Park and Ride and village access point. There is a new plan in place to build 45 units of mixed-use housing on the Gerrish Property and there is further study in the works on housing and next stage economic development strategies. Sustainable Woodstock helped form the municipal Economic Development Commission and the town passed a local options tax that has provided revenue to support more economic development activity.

Town/Village Merger

A vigorous effort by the Community Visit Merger Task Force came to a pitch with a Town Village Merger vote that failed by 9 votes. The Town and Village have a common manager and, following the failure of the merger vote, a number of features of town and village efforts have functionally merged so that most of the goals for the merger have been satisfied and the issue does not seem to be an ongoing priority.

What has Changed in Woodstock since the 2006 Community Visit? What Are 2018 Issues and Priorities for Woodstock as it looks to a new strategic effort?

“The people have changed.” There is a fundamental challenge to attract new families to town, youth and children.

The town has fewer and fewer full time residents. As houses have come on the market, more and more of them have been purchased by part time residents; for many people this is a crisis. Since the 2004 Community Visit the school population has gone from over 300 children to under 160...this is a fundamental threat to the future.

Meanwhile, residents point to decaying infrastructure, a number of empty storefronts, and a lack of capacity or mechanism to reinvest in needed core infrastructure—town office maintenance, school improvement, and other municipal and community needs.

There has been some progress. The school has developed a creative STEM lab and new playground that are attractants to students and families. Three separate co-working spaces have been developed in the town to attract and support entrepreneurs and emerging businesses. One of them has 18 participants which could grow into larger businesses in the future. There has also been some good progress in ageing-related programs for young seniors and older seniors. Many want to be sure the community is great for all ages.

But part of the past success of Woodstock contributes to the present challenges. Housing prices are set by the market of out of state purchasers rather than local working families. The costs of housing make it really difficult for new people, especially young people, to move in.

Commercial real estate is owned by a small group of out of state people who don't necessarily need to prioritize having dynamic businesses, and their rents are way too high. There are concerns of a lack of downtown vibrancy and some worry that the downtown doesn't welcome chain stores or general department stores that could provide goods for all parts of the community, but is really oriented to boutiques for visitors instead.

Many believe it is essential to build bridges to non-resident owners to share a vision for the future of the community. There needs to be a serious conversation.

Others are concerned that the next stage of community and economic development planning needs to take into account climate and economic models that provide solutions—this would draw in creative people from other places and could be a foundation of economic renewal.

Some see a need for more youth engagement, and see potential in mentorships; some shared the idea of a center in the school that would connect youth for out of school experiences, community service and mentorship opportunities.

Many community amenities and non-profits have been funded by philanthropists in the past, but those funds may be drying up and there's no systematic funding structure to replace them.

“We are sinking!” Residents complained that Woodstock has a “veneer of wealth” but it is really a “Mercedes on blocks.”

Some expressed the idea that the town needs to capture the imagination of the second homeowners and out of state investors, and build a dialogue now toward a dynamic economic future for the community.

Next Stage Strategy

Organizers look to a new public engagement to identify core priorities and action strategies, along with the community will and energy to implement them. The team is evaluating a variety of potential contractors as it looks to take on its challenges and renew its momentum for the future. VCRD’s final message in this meeting was one of encouragement and confidence: with all its challenges, Woodstock has people with so much human capacity—intellectually and organizationally. We look forward to hearing more about the decisions the town makes on its next process and then the progress ahead.