

## Economic Development Public Forum Notes

02/01/2016

Tom Bock opened the public meeting at 6 PM and made introductions. Bob Flint (SRDC) facilitated the meeting and Jason Rasmussen (SWCRPC) presented information about the planning process and next steps. The purpose of this meeting was to gather input on the local economy, specifically about the current conditions, desired future conditions and what the Town can do to achieve the desired future economic conditions.

Written comments were submitted from the Chester Economic Development Committee and the Town of Chester.

Bob Flint mentioned Windsor's recent marketing effort, which involved \$5,000 from the Town and \$5,000 from the State. The collaborative marketing effort targeted affluent people via Google. It generated 9,000 clicks on the Town's marketing webpage.

Marji Graf discussed Chamber services and made a few observations:

- A. The Chamber needs to get better information for the regional guidebook and website events calendar in order to help market Chester.
- B. The Chamber tries to direct people to Chester via Weston in order to get them to the Green. Traveling by VT 103, people often miss the Green and drive through town without stopping.
- C. Events, such as the fall festival, are successful – capitalize on those events
- D. Chester is known for arts and antiques – build on your strengths

Comments discussed at the meeting are summarized below:

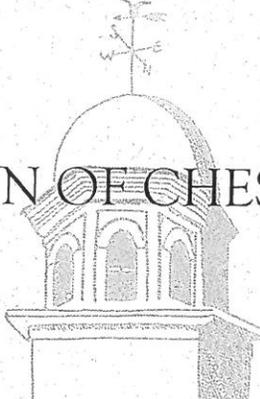
- A. Important economic sectors include agriculture, forestry, arts & crafts, culture, history and recreation
- B. Overall goal is to improve the socio-economic well-being of Chester residents
- C. Economic development is broader than just jobs
- D. Focus on maintaining and improving the quality of life
- E. Embrace Chester's place within the regional economy (e.g. success in the North Springfield Industrial Park can benefit Chester residents with jobs)
- F. Align land use regulations and infrastructure investment priorities with economic development goals
- G. Retention/employment of recent high school graduates
- H. Chester is a great place to live (i.e. great lifestyle, charming/historic village)
- I. Village charm brings thousands of visitors a year, but we need to make a concerted effort to capture more of the VT Route 103 traffic that passes by without knowing about the Green
- J. A plan is a great idea, but it needs to include an implementation plan with measurable actions. Don't be too ambitious. Identify some low-hanging fruit; we need some "wins" early on after the plan is completed.
- K. Three most important parts of town: the Green, Chester Depot, the Gateway (i.e. by the Legion along VT 103 South)
- L. Need to maintain the charm, culture, lifestyle that we currently have.
- M. Town needs to encourage/support successful businesses. Successful businesses, in turn, should invest in their buildings and help to improve the town.

## 2016 Chester Town Plan Update

- N. Strong Communities, Better Connections grant application that the Town submitted will help to identify specific improvements, such as signage and marketing.
- O. Chester needs additional shops (i.e. ladies shoe or apparel store) along the Green that might create a “browsing effect”. A strong business district with many good stores and restaurants will help to create a destination and generate increased business.
- P. Chester is a hidden gem; no one knows that it exists. Need more signage, website/social presence in order to get people here.
- Q. Need more events on the Green.
- R. Make the Green a destination (e.g. replace paving with cobble stones, patio dining, etc.). The Green should “become a place to dwell” like small, European villages that are the business and social center of the community.
- S. Businesses need incentives to make investments (e.g. loans, grants, lower taxes, tax breaks, tax credits)
- T. Increase traffic flow by the Green via signage, marketing
- U. Develop stronger unity among businesses along the Green
- V. Chester’s commercial properties are lower in price. As a result, there is less commercial broker activity in Chester (than in places like Lebanon and Burlington).
- W. Bank loans don’t view home occupations as a value added business.
- X. Encourage small businesses.
- Y. Seek more arts & crafts businesses in order to become a destination.
- Z. Pursue ways to become more interesting, fun, with things to do (e.g. events, amenities, cluster of similar businesses, etc.)
- AA. Look at NY State economic zones for inspiration. Create some kind of tax break or tax stabilization incentives for Chester.
- BB. Make Chester government business friendly
- CC. Consider a local options tax (e.g. Manchester’s 1% tax) to generate revenue to pay for some of these programs
- DD. Create an attractive gateway into the Stone Village (e.g. stone walls, public sculpture, farmer’s market)
- EE. Regarding workforce/demographics:
  - 1) Drew’s is now working 3 shifts
  - 2) Newsbank has a hard time finding higher-end workers
  - 3) Need to work with schools
  - 4) Need higher wages to help people move here
  - 5) Cost to do business in VT is high, businesses need to increase revenue
- FF. New Jiffy Mart location will change traffic patterns
- GG. Encourage home occupations and improve the charm of the VT 103 South “gateway” area
- HH. Consider a shop local program (“Shop Chester First”)
- II. Chester has very fast internet speeds; use that to your advantage
- JJ. Need more transportation options (i.e. public transportation with connections to Boston, need to make the Current’s services better known around town)
- KK. Delineate on-street parking around the Green
- LL. Improve traffic circulation (one-way along the Green) and improve wayfinding, directing traffic on where to go park and finds stuff to do

*2016 Chester Town Plan Update*

- MM. Take care of existing businesses/residents
- NN. Chester's is a tourist-based economy
- OO. The Town Plan reads well, but it does not work well in Act 250. It needs to be more specific (i.e. building size limits, design considerations). Projects need to be evaluated with the future in mind (i.e. buildings that last and contribute to local charm)
- PP. Scale of motion: slow traffic along VT Route 103, create/improve the environment for walking around the Green.
- QQ. There are eyesores along VT 103 south
- RR. Consider using the fields along VT 103 south for events/festival grounds (e.g. Chester smorgasbord)



# TOWN OF CHESTER

556 Elm Street  
P.O. Box 370  
Chester, VT 05143

(802) 875-2173  
Fax (802) 875 2237

## Town of Chester Economic Development Policy

The Town of Chester Economic Development Policy encourages a mix of business and other activities within the town limits. Other activities include but are not limited to, agriculture, forestry, arts & crafts, culture, history and recreation. The Town believes this diversity of activity will encourage further development. An overriding goal is to improve the socio-economic well-being of the citizens.

The Town has, and will maintain, an Economic Development Fund specifically designed to loan monies to new and existing business for the purpose of enhancing economic growth. To further define this fund's use, the money in it could also be used for non-traditional purposes. It could be used for signage to direct visitors to business, historic and recreational areas as just non-traditional example.

The Town also supports the philosophy of regional development and strives for cooperation in those endeavors. One important caveat before the Town cooperates is whether the project or policy in question benefits Chester and its residents. Development can happen and will be supported by Chester if such activity provides jobs to Chester residents. This support for activities outside of the Town will not include monetary support unless those activities can be shown to provide benefits in excess of the monetary contribution being requested. Since economic development does not happen overnight, these outside activities may need to be funded, for an undetermined time, until the benefits are realized. Dues or other similar expenses for organizations not directly located in Chester but that support Chester's development will be able to be funded if the Selectboard chooses to support them as part of the budgetary process.

Because of Chester's size, it depends on visitors to help support local retail establishments. To further define this market, the Town should undertake a zip code survey and tailor future marketing efforts to continue to attract and expand upon this core market segment to town.

**Zoning and land use policies should be aligned to match the Economic Development vision and vice-versa.**

Chester recognizes that in a vibrant economy some businesses may cease to exist while others will grow. To the extent possible, the Town will develop policies that encourage the retention of viable businesses already in Town. On the other hand, the fund must be used wisely and cannot finance or support failing businesses after a review of their operations by SRDC which is required prior to business related loans.

The Town also recognizes that agriculture, forestry, arts & crafts, cultural & history and recreation are all important aspects to the overall community. These too should be encouraged to develop. The Town may choose to enact future policies to that end as well. The Town welcomes funding requests from people and organizations engaged in these activities as long as they can show that what they do will encourage the growth or retention of economic activity in the Town or be of significant non-monetary benefit to many of the citizens.

**Infrastructure is important to any long range development goals.** The Town will therefore continue to fund, as well as seek outside assistance, for water, sewer, storm water projects as well as roads and sidewalk maintenance and improvements to add to the quality of life for current citizens and to assist future economic development. Typically this infrastructure funding will not be made by the Economic Development Fund but will come from other Town, State or Federal monies.

The Town of Chester will stress business development that does not cause significant investment to upgrade and/or expand already existing infrastructure that will put an undue burden on the taxpayer. This does not mean other business activity falling outside this parameter will be declined, only that it will be carefully reviewed for its benefits and to ascertain whether creative ways are possible to still attract a 'high-cost' enterprise without undue stress to individuals living in the community. Infrastructure development that can be financed at a minimum cost to residents will be looked at in a favorable light conditioned on the fact that planning, zoning and DRB requirements have been met. Ultimately, any benefits must be weighed in relation to their cost.

Since Economic Development is viewed in Socio-Economic terms, a high social cost may disqualify an enterprise as a choice for Chester. A vast junk yard at the entrance to Town may produce monetary benefits but aesthetically would not fit with the long-range vision many people hold for Chester, as an example.

While infrastructure is recognized to be important; so too is **public safety considered a vital element of the Town.** Chester will therefore continue to fund, as well as seek outside assistance to maintain high quality fire, police and ambulance departments in regards to equipment, facilities and service to the community. As with infrastructure funding, public safety funding will typically come from sources other than the Economic Development Fund.

**Solid waste disposal and recycling are also important aspects of a community's overall well-being.** Chester will continue to support the most efficient and cost effective means to deliver this service to its citizens.

Chester agrees that **education is important to any community.** Notwithstanding this statement, Chester will also advocate for the most efficient delivery of this product that still allows for the fullest academic achievement and life preparation of students. **Retention and employment, in the immediate area, of as many graduates as possible, is important to the Town.**

Chester must strive to be a clean, well maintained beautiful community. The Town should be an inviting place for citizens and visitors alike. Future plans should consider all age groups and their needs. **Attracting and retaining young families is vital to Chester's future.**

**Strong financial management of Town funds should be emphasized** so that efficient operations are maintained over the long-term. This management effort should in turn support future plans for the betterment of Chester.

## SUMMARY

Economic development should not be concerned solely with attracting new business to town. Nor should it only be concerned with economic returns. It should be viewed in a socio-economic framework so that all citizen's lives in the community will be improved. It should encompass the wide range of topics noted above. By creating and maintaining a beautiful, well managed community with a full complement of services, Chester will provide the basis for future the wellbeing of its residents.

Chester Economic Development Committee  
A Member of  
Chester Community Alliance, Inc.  
P. O. Box 561, Chester, VT 05143

Chester Economic Development Committee, CEDC herein, formerly organized and operating as Chester Economic Development Corporation, is one of three committees comprising Chester Community Alliance, Inc. Chester Community Alliance, Inc is a not for profit 501 c 3 charitable organization that has been created for the purposes of promoting a healthy, attractive and vibrant Chester, Vermont community which supports and respects the town's history, economy, character, culture and the arts. The Green Mountain Festival Series Committee and Chester Townscape Committee, together with CEDC, are the members of Chester Community Alliance, Inc., all of which committees are actively involved in town of Chester activities.

In response to the Guiding Questions provided to participants in this planning process, the following is offered by CEDC in support of the development of an Economic Development Chapter for the Chester Town Plan.

1. Does Chester have good job opportunities (locally or in immediately surrounding towns)?

As part of the larger socio-economic region including the neighboring towns of Springfield, Ludlow, Bellows Falls, Grafton, Andover, Baltimore and Weathersfield, Chester is in the center of an active economy. Jobs are available in all sectors, including automotive repair, food manufacturing, food distribution, high tech, education, health care, recreation and tourism and municipalities. In addition small businesses in the area offer employment in professional and service offices and sales opportunities.

The on-going difficulty for employers is finding qualified, drug-free, responsible job applicants. Our economy will only be successful if we can focus on a strong education component beginning in the elementary schools and on into the high schools to offer frequent guidance as to the standards and requirements expected of an employee, especially one who is entering the job force directly from high school.

2. Do residents feel a need to travel relatively long distances for higher-paying jobs?

Jobs are plentiful both within our region and further away, in the Upper Valley, Keene, Brattleboro and Rutland. Qualified employees should be able to find decent paying jobs within the region. The Upper Valley and Keene do have manufacturing, university and medical center employment opportunities which are, in all likelihood, paying higher wages than in the local region. However, those employment centers, as well as Brattleboro, are only 45 minutes drive time from Chester. A bigger challenge to working at jobs outside of Chester is the availability of private and public transportation.

3. What challenges do existing businesses experience?

a. A good local workforce with adequate skills.

Chester and our region have a large number of skilled workers presently working. However the need for additional skilled workers is a major issue with local employers. The education component is a driver of successful economic development.

b. Houses and apartments that workers can afford.

Chester has a supply of moderate cost rental housing. Signs advertising rental opportunities are hung out. Many younger employees continue to live with the family in the family home. A good economic development plan will call for a study to determine the availability of housing for workers, presently and in the future.

c. Marketing.

Although each business can speak for itself, marketing opportunities are increasing in the town and region. Okemo Valley Regional Chamber of Commerce aggressively provides marketing opportunities for member and non-member businesses alike. It has a first class web site, frequently updated and constantly monitored. As well the Chamber presents marketing seminars to businesses on a frequent basis. Springfield Regional Development Corporation, with a focus on business development and retention within the region that includes Chester, maintains an active schedule of marketing opportunities for businesses in the region. With a major donation from Chester Rotary Club, CEDC has been successful in producing the Chester brochure to market Chester businesses, with 5,000 copies having been distributed. Community activities, such as Chester Old Home Day, with fireworks, the upcoming celebration of Chester's birthday, the Big Buzz Chain Saw Festival, the annual Fall Festival and Chester Music Series, sponsored by Chester Rotary Club, and Music in the Meadow have all provided increased opportunities to market the town of Chester.

Comments at the end of this paper will address marketing needs that could be part of the economic development chapter.

4. Is tourism important for local businesses? If so, what can be done to improve the local tourist-based economy?

Tourism is one of the most important engines driving our local economy. Comments at the end of this paper will address issues relating to tourism.

5. What kind of new jobs are desirable? What types of businesses would help to diversify Chester's economy.

Our 3 major employers in Chester are NewsBank, Drew's and the municipal government and school system. We must be aware of the employment needs and opportunities that these employers can provide, working to address their issues and concerns in order to retain these important members of the employment sector. For with additional jobs can come an expanded property tax base as these employers expand their manufacturing and work place facilities. However, we need to recognize that regional job growth outside of Chester can have a positive impact on Chester if we can attract those employed elsewhere to reside in our town and take advantage of the educational, shopping, life style and recreational opportunities here.

As important as the larger employers may be to the community, it is the small businesses that populate our business centers that can be the lifeblood of an economically successful community. These businesses are restaurants, book stores, dry goods stores, pharmacies, grocery stores, retail shops, professional offices and other businesses that are operated as home occupations. Small business will locate in a town that is open and welcoming, with zoning requirements that are not burdensome, good parking, signage and transportation, and a place that is attractive to customers and family members.

The topography of Chester, with its hilltops and river valleys, does not offer a large amount of commercial development opportunities. However a good economic development plan will identify those properties attractive to commercial development, with water, sewer, internet, and transportation readily available.

#### 6. Village Center.

A successful village center needs a good plan. Comments at the end of this paper will address this question.

#### 7. What type of new businesses do you want to see around the Green? In the Depot?

New businesses need to be thoughtfully planned, properly capitalized and attractive to the community and our many visitors. Although serendipity and well-administered zoning regulations will have a determining impact on the kinds of new businesses that locate in Chester, proper planning is required to attract new businesses. Good parking, sidewalks, public bathrooms, signage and opportunities will be a major factor in the attraction of new business.

#### 8. What challenges exist to make that happen?

The biggest challenge is finding the courage to think outside of the box.

#### 9. Are the Unified Development Bylaws adequate to encourage the kind of new businesses that you want, where you want?

We have not had good experiences with the new bylaws. The Chester Armory site is

practically vacant, as the much-anticipated relocation of about 18 jobs from Springfield to Chester has been thwarted by unnecessary restrictions in the new bylaws. The long delay in permit approvals for expansion of current business operations or new business locations has caused frustration with the applicants. If we want to grow our business economy in Chester, then we need to develop a smoother and clearer permit process for these business applicants.

10. Project to encourage village revitalization.

Comments at the end of this paper will address this.

11. What programs will help achieve a good local economy?

We will enjoy the discussion generated by this question.

Chester Economic Development Committee

Bill Dakin  
Chair  
February 1, 2016

Written Comments from a few members of CEDC:

From Rick Paterno:

As a local business owner and engaged citizen of Chester I am excited about the development of this town initiative. A formal, well thought out town plan which includes input from the community and has enthusiastic support from town government, the business community and all taxpayers is critical to the growth and prosperity of Chester. The timing of this initiative is quite good. There is a lot of positive energy in town right now. We have a number of active groups, both civic and business, which have been doing great work to promote our town and improve the quality of life for our citizens and visitors. These groups include; The Rotary Club, The Chester Conservation Commission, The Chester Community Alliance which includes The Chester Townscape Committee and The Chester Economic Development Committee and others. There is a strong nucleus of devoted and passionate people who are driven by a desire to see our community prosper. Leveraging the knowledge and commitment of these groups along with attracting new interest will be paramount to the successful rollout of an Economic Development plan.

Obviously, this plan will be very comprehensive with a long term strategic vision. It should build on and exploit the many assets we already process as a town...a place thousands of

people visit every year! A charming and historic village, numerous inns and B&Bs, amazing outdoor recreation; skiing, snowmobiling, biking, hiking, hunting and much more...we have unique shopping and gifted artisans and craft people, a historic train and station and a road which winds directly through our town bringing countless visitors from Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York and beyond.

With that said, targeting tourism and attracting more visitors to Chester should be an integral part of any Economic Development Plan. Tapping into and expanding what is already a major component of our economy. It is truly the " low hanging fruit". It is the easiest way to achieve quick success. Success begets success...positive energy builds on itself. It is imperative that we ensure success in the early stages of the implementation of this plan. We must achieve measurable results year one. Highly visible projects that have broad support in the community will give the plan momentum. Garnering and sustaining public support for the plan is critical for the longer term success.

My desire to focus on tourism in the initial rollout of this plan is driven by my belief that the only way to stimulate longer term and broader economic growth is to begin that process from a position of strength. Again, growth begets growth! It will certainly be easier to attract new home buyers or business start ups or skilled workers or locals willing to invest in rehabbing buildings if we have an energized economy. It really is a story of " if you build it they will come"!

I would also caution that we do not allow the plan to become overly ambitious in an effort to satisfy every special interest in town. The goal of the town should be to draft a plan that favors the greater good. There will always be someone who doesn't like something...that's human nature and life in a small town. Any strategic plan should have task, challenge and be somewhat optimistic but it must be achievable.

I realize these comments and thoughts are long on vision and strategy and short on specifics. They were intended to be. I look forward to the next steps in the process and welcome the opportunity to get together as a group to brainstorm more specifics.

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From Steven Davis:

Any organization, whether it is a business or a governmental entity, must invest to survive. The difference between success and failure is where and how those investments are made.

Chester is fortunate to have assets that differentiate us from surrounding towns: a healthy historic village center; a transportation infrastructure that brings traffic into town on the two highways; events and activities throughout the year to attract visitors; and a core of citizens

committed to making Chester a vital and vibrant community to work, live and visit.

The economic development plan must build on these and other strengths and channel investments into those areas that will realize the greatest return, in keeping the character of the community. This requires a dedicated employee to work with regional organizations and entities to promote Chester's interests and to quickly and competently respond to new opportunities with creative and sound solutions. The Economic Development Fund should be used and not kept in the bank!

Certainly tourism must play a major role in Chester's economic development plans. The population of Chester, even with assistance from surrounding communities, is insufficient to sustain most of our current retail businesses. Getting the traffic already passing through town to stop and shop is clearly the low hanging fruit for enhanced economic vitality.

Chester should be proud of the initiatives that individuals have undertaken to enhance and promote our community. The Chester Townscape Committee's initiatives to beautify the town with plantings and building improvements demonstrates that the people have the desire, will and commitment to make Chester an attractive place to visit, shop and live. The Rotary Club and Chester Economic Development Committees' initiative to develop and distribute a brochure promoting Chester's businesses has demonstrated the willingness of local businesses to join together to promote the greater good. The Chester Conservation Commission and Chester Townscape's walking tour brochures are innovative, low cost initiatives to make Chester more attractive to residence and visitors.

But inadequate signage, parking and basic services (such as public restrooms) distract from all these efforts to make the town attractive place to visit, shop and live. I can attest to the commonly heard refrain that people heading to Okemo, Killington or other points west can travel through Chester for decades and not even realize that there is an historic town green. Certainly, this cannot be an intractable problem to resolve.

Those of us who make Chester our home share uneasiness about declining property values, homes on the market for years without selling, unkempt properties on major thoroughfares; and the slowness of government to promote the common good. These factors distract from our community and hamper our ability to positively differentiate Chester. There is an old saying, nothing works better than success. Let's make Chester so successful and attractive that businesses and people will compete to have an opportunity to live and work here. Let's raise the bar!

The development of an Economic Development Plan for Chester is a critical starting point for the town moving forward with a shared vision and common goals.

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From Julie Pollard:

- 1 – promote Chester’s excellent quality of life, through new website, social media and print
- 2 – promote the idea of shopping locally; as part of the marketing campaign, include the component of “Shop Chester First” – we all know it’s not possible to purchase everything in Town, but if residents and visitors make it a habit to try Chester businesses first, before going out of Town, it would make a measurable difference to local businesses
- 3 – adding an Economic Development person to the Town payroll, either part-time or full-time; some pay could come from Town, or the loan fund, but majority could be commissions, paid on measurable results to bring businesses and tourists to Chester
- 4 – convert the Academy Building into an Information Center with public restrooms and Historical Museum
- 5 – convert Yosemite Fire Station into a Museum
- 6 – bring an educational institution to Chester; either a community college, technical school or branch of a university
- 7 – bring a drug store to Chester
- 8 – install a 4-season Recreation area at the Pinnacle
- 9 – promote WiFi available to attract “footloose” workers – those who work from home and/or over the Internet

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From Tom Bocks:

I would like to see long term consideration of utilizing the 300+ acres of Water Dept. land on Reservoir Road for recreational use; specifically for winter sports such as x-country skiing, snowshoeing & ice skating & possibly including support facilities.

I would also like to see an initiative to encourage more residential development.