



Marlboro in second phase of discussions of future

By JAIME CONE / Reformer Staff
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MARLBORO -- Entering the second phase of its Community Visit Program in Marlboro, the Council on Rural Development's community team will meet again with residents and begin to take some first steps toward action on April 29.

The community visit is designed to help the town consider the challenges before it, prioritize needs, build teams and action plans to address them, set strategies to get needed resources and gain connections with the advice of state, federal and non-profit leaders.

At the first visit in March, more than 150 community members met in sessions over the course of the day with a group of 25 state and federal leaders to look at the strengths of the community and the challenges ahead. The discussions covered nine topics ranging from land use and infrastructure to community vision and the potential for a community center.

"It was a tremendous turnout for a town as small as Marlboro," said Paul Costello, executive director of the VCRD. "Proportionally, it was one of the best turnouts we've seen; we were delighted."

He added that Marlboro is the smallest town the VCRD has ever worked with on this project.

"It was astonishing to watch how ideas flowed out of the discussion forums," said Forrest Holzapfel, a

Marlboro resident who is serving as chairman for the three-month long Community Visit process.

"The townspeople I've spoken with are looking forward to the upcoming stages of the process and narrowing our focus on attainable goals that will benefit us all," Holzapfel said.

The VCRD has done community visits all over the state, facilitating projects in 32 communities including Bellows Falls in 1998 and Wilmington in 2001.

"We look for a town that may feel like it falls off the map when it comes to state and federal services," Costello said. "Towns with lots of great ideas, but they're wondering what their next steps are."

Costello added that Marlboro was picked because it's a town that is poised to have a public conversation and because the community wants to involve more people in thinking about the future.

"The community turnout at the Community Visit Day was proof that Marlboro townspeople are hungry to make some changes in our town, and the enthusiasm during the whole day was very encouraging," said Holzapfel.

During 13 hours of discussion, 25 pages of dense notes were gathered from the forums held at the last visit. The Council for Rural Development staff used the notes to determine what the common ideas were, and next week they will present more than 20 main ideas to the town.

"People can debate over which ones are the most important and which ones to do first over the next few years," Costello said. "Then we help rally state, federal and other kinds of support to them."

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"We're pretty well connected, and we'll do everything we can to help," he added.

The projects that towns chose to pursue vary widely.

In Johnson, community members rallied to gain financial support to fix three bridges entering into the village while tackling a downtown redesign and water and sewer needs, all at the same time.

"It pulled together like a package," said Costello. "They were able to get an \$8 million grant to replace the bridges ... sometimes there is significant infrastructure that can follow (the community visits)."

In Poultney, where Green Mountain College is at one end of Main Street and Poultney High School at the other end, the community complained that young people were getting into trouble and loitering on the streets with nothing to do.

"At the college there are many outdoor recreation majors, so (participating residents) said, 'Can't we turn our town into a laboratory to provide exciting activities for young people?'" Costello said.

"All it cost was people lining up to work together," he added. "We're just as proud of that when it happens. Every town has very different accomplishments."

Public participation is crucial for the next step of the process, he said.

"It's important that we keep up the momentum that was generated at the Community Visit day discussions between residents and the visiting

team," agreed Marlboro Selectboard member Lucy Gratwick.

"It doesn't matter if you missed the first meeting," she added. "Everyone is invited to come to this next session."

The Marlboro Community Meeting will be held April 29 from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at the Marlboro Elementary School's Outback Gym.

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