



This is the town's big chance

Thursday March 29, 2012

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I have heard the voice of Bennington, and there is reason for hope. The Vermont Council on Rural Development paid us a visit recently. They held forums to stimulate a discussion on how to improve our community. What was said there was compelling, and inspiring.

Many topics interested me, particularly those on the economy, our image, and the young people of our community. But I didn't expect to be moved by what was said, even though many of the ideas were not new and even though no one ever tried to implement them before.

These forums were recorded on CAT-TV and are being replayed. Please watch them. Listen to what they said.

The owner of the Hawkins House believes the downtown district should be expanded. I agree with him. It could be extended out from North Street to County Street, and it should also be extended eastward on Main Street to at least the old Bennington Middle School. A move like that would encourage new small businesses to develop in our downtown, and counter some of the high rental rates, making more property available in the downtown district. We need more business here. This is one sure way of getting it.

Town Manager Stu Hurd spoke about the town's low-interest loans. He said he thought it might be time to rethink the conditions for these loans to make them more flexible for users. Those loans would also stimulate new business, and new jobs, building our grand list and knitting our town together.

Jim Carroll, one of our new Select Board members, spoke about his pet project of having a park and pond close to our downtown. Jim gave a price tag of about \$5 million. If we could grow our local economy and our grand list, dreams like this might be possible in the future.

Several young people attended these meetings and several spoke about not really feeling they belonged in our community. This is tragic and reversible. We cannot alienate the next generation, or fail to inspire them to be proud of where they live. We must work to include them in any new plans we make in this new life of Bennington. We need to listen to them.

When the council comes back in about a month to present their report on the forums, what then? Whose responsibility is it to pick up the ball and run with it? Is it the Select Board or the town manager and his staff? I say it is everyone's duty. This really is a golden opportunity to get Bennington thinking of our short- and long-term plans for the future.

I don't know what will come of these forums. But we should thank the Vermont Council on Rural Development for at least giving us another chance for our citizens and local officials to do some soul searching.

If we fail this time around, it's no one's fault but our own. No more excuses like blaming the feds or the state. Let me repeat: It is our responsibility. We have a real opportunity for a renaissance of Bennington.

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