

Mt. Anthony Union High School Forum Notes

Compiled from discussions held with 170 high school students on March 8, 2012

What's going on today in Bennington that makes it a good place? What are you proud of?

- More kids starting to play sports at a younger age which keeps kids out of trouble.
- More things are going green; more awareness around helping the environment.
- The downtown has refurbished a lot – lights, activity, things to do.
- Events like the Garlic Fest, Car Show, Moose Fest, May Fest, Midnight Madness, and other community activities put on by the town or stores bring thousands of people to town. We have lots of tourists.
- Another car dealership came to town so car sales must be going well.
- Our school. Education isn't bad. Could be improved but we're doing alright.
- Good athletics: we have a "dirty" (aka very good) wrestling team.
- Career Development Center (CDC) is an asset. It helps a lot of people figure out what they want to do and they also have adult education classes.
- We have free will, there are no restrictions.
- It's a safe place to live most of the time; no one is getting jumped.
- The old people's home is an asset.
- We have a Planned Parenthood for protection against pregnancy.
- Multi-cultural.
- Bennington Rotary fundraises for scholarships.
- Scenery and foliage, mountains; no billboards.
- Small town businesses.
- Quiet, not so commercial.
- Great local hospital to give birth.
- The hospital offers a free clinic downtown near Main Street.
- Willow Park is a good place. Howard Park in Shaftsbury.
- Highway is being put in which is both good and bad. It will cut off 10 minutes between here and Brattleboro but no one will come into town, they will just bypass it.

What are the Challenges facing Bennington?

- 5 out of the 90 students at one forum said they plan to live in Bennington after they graduate. 12 plan to stay in Vermont. Most are planning to leave Vermont.
- Not a fun or good place to live so everyone just wants to get out of here. No good reason to stay.
- There's nothing to do and nothing is good about Bennington.
- Most kids just walk around town. You get bored bowling or going to movies – can only do that so many times.
- There's nothing to do so people smoke weed.
- Bad drug problems here. People resort to drugs and alcohol because there's not a lot to do.
- Drugs in this town need to be cleaned out.
- Everyone has an attitude that they don't want to be here. They wish their parents never moved here.
- No opportunities in Bennington. Don't want to come back here after college because there aren't opportunities to support a family here.
- Bennington is good place to raise a family but there are no good jobs here.
- Stores are going under so people are losing jobs and being laid off.
- Not many jobs. Nobody looking for help around here. High School students are at the bottom of the totem pole for getting jobs.
- Local businesses are going down and major companies are taking their place, like Dollar Stores. WalMart shut Wendy's down.
- Zoning laws are too tight. Can't build a mill in one location because it's only meant for housing.
- Shopping wise – same old things. No diverse restaurants.
- Town seems to put things in without considering why. Our money goes to pointless stuff, not things that make the community better. A new Petco is coming in but we don't need another pet store.
- We have 5 dollar stores but not one nice clothing store.
- We have more car dealerships than anything.
- The new businesses seem to be more geared to adults. Not enough for the youth community. Albany has clubs that kids can hang out in. We had NAPS a couple years ago but it isn't here anymore.
- A lot of empty buildings: super store, blockbuster, rent-a-center, cvs. The old middle school is vacant. Something else needs to be there.
- Don't have name brand hotels except Hampton Inn and Best Western.
- Tourists don't have places to shop. Only everyday stores like WalMart or K-Mart. Have to go half hour to 45 minutes away to go shopping.
- Bennington didn't want to be a business district.

- Most buildings look old.
- Vandalism. The old middle school was vandalized and so was the Grotto.
- Gang affiliations and gang activity. The Banner has been talking about it. Someone's car got blown up and maybe it was gang related.
- We have stray animals that aren't being taken care of.
- High poverty rate; not enough jobs; people on welfare.
- Not enough affordable housing. At minimum wage you can't afford the price of apartments or housing.
- Gas prices and costs going up. You have to drive to get anywhere. Tough on household budgets. People find it hard to pay for gas to get places.
- No transportation for kids to get places. Things are so spread out they can't get there on foot. They're too young to drive, and have no money for gas.
- Our community is so spread out. It's hard for people who live in Pownal or Shaftsbury to feel connected. It takes ½ hour to go grocery shopping which also costs a lot in gas.
- Pownal and Woodville people tend to go to MA rather than Bennington.
- Need money to do things, not a lot of free activities. Not easy to find a job and get money to do things.
- Welfare is too easy to get. They just hand the money out without making sure the people are trying to maintain a job and steady income.
- Sometimes the focus on welfare piece isn't as balanced – some people have 2nd and 3rd jobs because they aren't paid enough to pay the bills. A lot of people in poverty are working hard but don't have high enough paying jobs.
- Teachers complain that they don't get paid enough. They should get a summer job – the rest of us have to work year-round.
- New highway under construction. There are questions about why they made it; what was wrong with the way it was? Why not fix roads instead and put more things to do here? Instead of making Bennington better they're bypassing it completely.
- New roads are going in that are nice but the new highway means people won't even have to go into Bennington. What will bring people in to town?
- The highway makes the town look ugly. It will affect us.
- The roads are bad. There's no money to keep them up.
- There's a dirt road in North Bennington that is always in disrepair: Paran Acres.
- There's no open indoor gym to go play basketball. The school gym gets booked for school sports but they don't even have enough space for all the sports that need space. The dance girls have to practice in the hallway.
- Rec Center is scary. Not fun to be around. Sketchy people hang out there. Bathrooms are creepy.
- The Recreation Center is pretty outdated. It's a bad place to hang out.
- Indoor tennis courts are expensive.
- People interrupt practices at the tennis center. People are bored.
- No skate park in Bennington.
- Need more lanes in our bowling alley.
- Festivals are geared more for adults.
- Adults have a negative view of the kids in town. Even when we do positive stuff, like go to the rec center, adults will yell at you. We don't want to be seen at those places because people in town look bad on them.
- The town doesn't seem to really care about school sport events. They don't come out to games or meets.
- We have strong sports teams usually – but they are starting to go downhill.
- This is an identified 'failing school.' It's got a bad record. It's not a school that colleges look at which is a problem and a worry for students.
- Bennington has a high teenage pregnancy rate; lots of young parents here. There's a daycare center at the high school. But it's also a regular business; people from all over the community use it.
- Scenery-wise Manchester is similar to Bennington but they can draw more tourists because they have other things tourists want like good stores, restaurants, hotels.
- Bennington has no diversity. Only Caucasians and people are closed minded.
- Self-image is a challenge in and of itself. Our self image is that there's nothing to do. How do you break out of the sense that there's nothing to do.
- People sit back and wait for things to change and something to happen. Whose responsibility is it? It's a challenge that the town has.
- People think change can't come because of the economy. How will we have money to make a rec center?
- So many multi-generational families and people who never get out of Bennington. They don't have knowledge of what it's like outside Bennington. Don't have educated opinions. It brings everything down.
- Nothing encouraging here, nothing here that makes kids want to be successful unless they're playing sports.
- Most people haven't travelled a lot so they don't have new ideas. Need to travel to see how others live to know what's possible. Need hope to make change.

What can be done to make Bennington a dynamic place to live?

- We need more stuff to do. Need a big activity center/field house or a YMCA where we can play basketball or have a dance. We need a building to go play baseball during cold months.
- We need a community center/rec center or a YMCA with basketball courts, weight room, pool, place to Spar, a place people can go practice their sports.
- Bring in a YMCA or boys or girls club for basketball courts, a nicer pool, weight room, free things to do. Y's make jobs for people too.
- Create a Skate Park – people skate in this town so much.
- Offer more recreational sports for kids. In general the only sports people focus on are Little League or wrestling.
- Music center would be cool where you can play instruments or guitar. There is one shop on Main St. The HS has a chorus and band but not for public use. It would be great to have a public place to go play like a guitar center.
- Create a music venue. Spreading the love of music.
- Renovate the old empty buildings with things to do.
- Build something that would keep teens out of trouble. At Town Meeting Day it was hard to look at the budget and understand where the money is going and what's being funded. Bennington free library asking for another 12k; school wants to add \$23 million to the budget. That's a lot of money. What do you get for that? Need more transparency and access to information and openness in the budget process so the citizens can have more of a voice. Include specific activities in there that would help keep kids out of trouble.
- Restore some of the old mills and buildings like the button hotel or rebuild the hark theater that burnt down in the 70s. Old Castle is looking for a place to go.
- Catamount and old middle school are just sitting there to rot. They are unsafe. There could be a workforce go in and clean them it up to make them safe. Catamount is putting soccer in there but why target one sport? We need a recreational center for more sports.
- Better movie theatre, IMAX.
- Arcade game store.
- More activity up at ____ House. Have a concession stand.
- Clean it up more – there's a lot of trash in the street. Greenup day is viewed as a day people don't litter, not a day they pick up trash.
- Our school needs to be updated; creepy stairwells.
- Make Bennington a more business friendly place. Right now you have to jump through hoops with flaming monkey's to get your idea out there. Drop the useless and redundant regulations. Drop the working age to 15 to be able to pump gas or work the mill.
- Need more publicized activities.
- Publicize Bennington more. No one knows about it.
- Have a museum that is more publicized.
- Bennington Museum charges high admission for small town with a lot of poverty. Make it accessible for people that live here. A pass for local folks.
- Fix some of its roads and bridges. Infrastructure is old.
- Cut wasteful spending. Put money toward a more organized business bureau instead of on frivolous activities.
- More industry so that people can have a decent job out of high school.
- More events on raising school spirit so the town is more into it and engaged.
- Maybe students could volunteer around town and get the word out about athletic events and invite people.
- Make it required for students to do community service so they are better prepared for college and they know better what they want to do in the future. There is no requirement in the school district to do it now.
- Community services program should go to an actual workplace or offer internships. So the community gets to know the kids as helpful in the community.
- Clean up the drugs in this town because there's an abundance of them.
- We need more localized economy – keep the money in the community. We don't get tourists unless it's the fall.
- Should have a Bennington Day that brings in families and make things to sell.
- Close down Main Street once a month in the summer for a "May Fest" type event.
- More name brand shops.
- Train to link us to Albany and a rail trail from N Benn to Benn. Would address diversity issue and diversity of shops.
- Build on the assets we have such as: Garlic Fest, Irish Fest, Hemmings Motor News. We need to link onto those good things. They bring in thousands of people.
- Bring in a local sports team. SVC teams have gotten more exciting. Maybe we can have more of a partnership with them.