
Revitalizing Village Centers

While the information above spells out the requirements for designation, there is a lot more to revitalizing a village center than simply preparing this application. This section provides additional information that may be helpful to your community in developing a village revitalization *process*. The information below is distinct from, and is **not required** for, designation.

What is revitalization?

Revitalization means mobilizing community efforts and energy to improve the village center. It means identifying projects - and activities - that will make it a more vibrant, attractive, and livable place, and organizing the people and money needed to make it happen. In particular:

Projects: Around Vermont, there are many physical improvements and projects being done to improve our village centers – such as:

- Community centers
- Recreational space and facilities
- Sidewalks, landscaping, benches
- Roads, traffic calming, parking, bike paths, and other transportation improvements
- Water and sewage capacity
- Schools
- Retention of US Post Office facilities
- Improvements to historic buildings
- Business improvements
- New infill development

Activities: The vitality of a community is defined as much by the shared sense of belonging to that community – seen in the activities that take place – and the level of involvement in those activities, such as:

- Public celebrations (festivals, concerts and fairs),
- Civic functions (school activities, libraries, post offices, churches, and recreation facilities),
- Support of local businesses where people congregate (general stores, hardware stores, coffee shops, beauty salons, etc.).

What links all of these activities together is volunteer efforts to make it happen. Often this will take place around one structure or improvement, like improvements to a community center or town green. Or perhaps a committee is formed to organize a harvest festival.

It would be a mistake to think that town government is responsible for everything – it often can be the catalyst for a project, or may be the place where various projects are coordinated. But it is the willingness of people to volunteer their time and expertise to help improve their village center that leads to a vibrant community.

How to get started?

Successful revitalization processes generally seem to begin in one of two ways. The first arises from a general sense that there are problems or threats in the village center, but no one is quite sure what to do. This in turn leads to a community “visioning” process, identifying both problems and assets, setting goals, and planning for the projects and activities that will lead to a more vibrant community. The “doing” may come later, usually with the people involved in the planning effort stepping forward to lead the various projects. (Some communities seek planning help through grants from the Community Development Block Grant Program or the Municipal Planning Grants Program, both available through the Department of Economic, Housing and Community Development).

As an alternative, a group of people may come together to do a specific project – restore an historic building into a community center, or create a sidewalk or path so people can safely walk around the village center. At some point, some of these groups expand their purpose, and begin to take on additional projects leading to a revitalization process.

Common Characteristics

- **Local leadership.** Successful revitalization efforts come about as a result of local leadership. Key players are typically the selectboard/village trustees, local volunteer groups (like the historical society and conservation commission), and the planning commission. Other local organizations, like schools, might also play an important role. Sometimes outside organizations – like regional planning commissions (planning activities, transportation projects), affordable housing groups (building projects) or land trusts – get involved on a project-by-project basis. But it takes local leadership and vision to pull together the community and make things happen, and typically a strong volunteer-based effort. Identifying all the local organizations and groups in a community is likely to reveal opportunities for building support.
- **Existing assets.** One of the lessons learned from downtown revitalization is that a community should base its efforts on improving what it already has, not in reinventing itself into something new – a lesson that applies equally well in village centers. Since most village centers are historic, the preservation of the historic structures is frequently an early focus of village groups – town halls, granges, schools, libraries, or churches – whether they continue their traditional use or are adapted for a new function. Conservation and improvement of natural resources such as paths, trails, riversides and

streambanks are also popular local projects. A community often may need to improve town greens, sidewalks, water and sewage systems, transportation improvements, and other infrastructure. Finally, many communities have traditional events – like fairs, harvest dinners, music events, holiday gatherings – which are existing assets that help define the community and can play a very prominent role in a revitalization process.

- **Incremental.** Revitalization takes place over time, and through a *series* of projects and activities. Very rarely is there “just one thing” that will fix all problems. Successful communities understand that revitalization is a *process*, not one big project, and develop a variety of projects and activities that will lead to long term improvement of the village center. Patience pays off in the end.
- **Growth and planning.** Villages are not frozen in time. They have evolved over the years, and there will likely be changes in the community in the future. Among other changes, this means there will likely be growth in the community, which needs to be guided in order for the village center to remain an attractive place to live. Successful village centers have thought through various growth issues, including residential infill, where new residential growth areas might be located, and where new commercial development would best fit within the village fabric. Strip development and low density housing generally are not consistent with historic village patterns, and can detract from their attractiveness and viability. A number of communities have adopted a design review process as part of their zoning review in order to ensure that development is designed to enhance, rather than detract, from the existing village environment.

Getting Help

While village revitalization is locally led, that doesn't mean there isn't help available. Once a local group has been formed and organized, there are several places to turn, including:

- Regional Planning Commissions. Every Vermont municipality is a member of one of the 12 regional planning commissions. They can provide help on a broad range of topics, including (but not limited to) land use and transportation planning, community facilities, capacity studies, mapping, and community organizing. They may also be able, on a project-by-project basis, to identify other programs that can provide targeted assistance. To find which commission serves your community, visit <http://www.vapda.org>
- Preservation Trust of Vermont. PTV offers both field staff and small grants that can help a community plan for and carry out projects that rehabilitate historic buildings. They also have a good web site that offers more information at www.PTVermont.org.
- Smart Growth Vermont (SGV) and their programs have recently merged with the Vermont Natural Resources Council. The former SGV programs now fall under the Sustainable Communities Program at VNRC and will offer a wide range of publications and training opportunities to support local efforts to support downtowns and village centers, and reduce sprawl. Their web site offers a tremendous amount of information at <http://www.smartgrowthvermont.org/>
- Department of Economic, Housing and Community Development. DEHCD offers a number of programs that can assist a community – including Historic Preservation,

Community Development, Housing, and Land Use Planning – all of which are outlined at <http://www.dhca.state.vt.us/Planning>.