

Bethel Better Block

Creating a Livable and Vibrant Downtown



The Challenge

Many communities in Vermont have struggled to redefine themselves after the decline of their heyday. It's common place to see vacant storefronts, declining local businesses, empty sidewalks, and historic buildings falling into disrepair. Until recently, this was Bethel's story. Bethel was once a vibrant town with stone quarries and mills, a booming downtown and tight-knit community. Over the past few decades the town's core started to fade away. As factories moved production, retail and other businesses moved outside of the village center and local shops closed. Change does not happen overnight, but when residents choose to reinvest in their town, utilizing infrastructure and buildings that already exist- small projects can have a lasting impact.

The Solution

In March 2016, the Bethel Revitalization Initiative applied for a technical assistance opportunity through [AARP of Vermont](#). Bethel was selected to receive support and funding from AARP and assistance from [Team Better Block](#). Together they created Vermont's first Better Block project, a two-day long experimental transformation of Bethel's downtown. As the town looks for ways to grow the tax base and improve quality of life, the national Better Block model creates temporary demonstrations to "try on" ideas. From safer pedestrian crossings, to pop-up art collectives in vacant buildings, the town can test out different ideas before making a large capital investment towards permanent improvements. Bethel's strong community involvement, town government support, historic downtown center, and can-do enthusiasm made it the perfect place for a Better Block project.

Community Group Builds Connections

The Bethel Revitalization Initiative (BRI) formed in 2005, by town members interested in strengthening community groups and thinking about the future of Bethel. The group had a resurgence in 2011, after the town was devastated by Tropical Storm Irene. Town members began creating innovative solutions to reinvigorate the town, and rebuild a sense of community and trust. BRI organized community potlucks for residents to come together, share opinions and discuss the future of their town. BRI also created Bethel University, a pop-up university offering free classes every March where anyone can teach or take a course on any topic they choose. Bethel sought to reverse the decline of the downtown and forge a new direction. Through these efforts, Bethel is acting as a community to define the future of their town.



For more information, please contact:

Richard Amore: richard.amore@vermont.gov or 802.828.5229

Website: <http://accd.vermont.gov/community-development/designation-programs/village-centers>

Getting Started



Members of the Bethel Revitalization Initiative worked with AARP Vermont and Team Better Block consultants to gather community input and ideas for how to improve downtown. The goal of Better Block is to bring community members together to think through issues facing the village like vacant store fronts, heavy traffic and noise. Working together, community members can voice their concerns and come up with creative solutions to those problems.

1

The process started with a 'Walk and Talk' where residents walked downtown pointing out favorite places, troubled spots, and areas where the town could improve. More than 75 people participated in round table conversations, brainstorming ideas for what Bethel could look like in the future. Residents mapped the community assets and needs, focusing on preserving town history, public spaces for people and safe pedestrian crossing, along with speed and noise reduction.

2

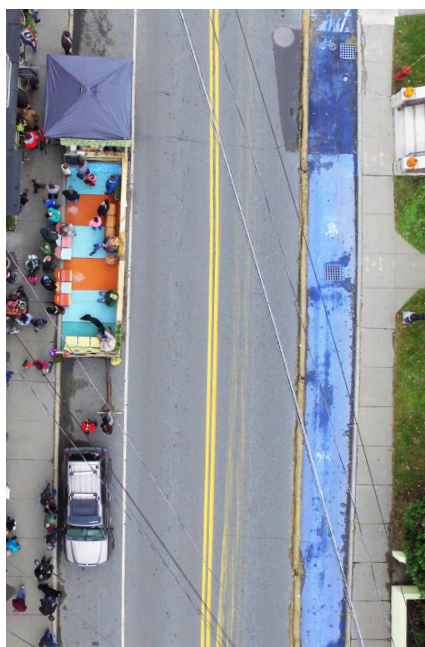
Next, community members created the foundation for the event. They created teams to organize pop-up shops, lead clean up days, plan art and building projects, and clean up public spaces.

3

The process culminated in the weekend-long Better Block event. Bethel's town government and public institutions as well as local businesses, community organizations, individuals and local press came together to make the event a success.

“Better Block demonstrations replace the top-down planning process with grassroots efforts that focus on immediate actions that improve quality of life, spark revitalization and build community.”

-Andrew Howard, Principal, Team Better Block



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Blossom Block



A key asset for the weekend was the use of the Blossom Block, a vacant building in the heart of downtown which was in the process of being sold. The new owner already owns a successful multi-use building in town and was excited to see the space come to life with temporary businesses.

14 Pop-Up Businesses & demonstrations



Type	Shop Name
Taco Stand	Crazy Gringo Taco Stand
Locally Made Shop	Made In Bethel
Craft Shop	Loominations of Vermont
Book & Record Store	Riverside Books & Beats
Kids Art Space	The Hive
Beer Garden	Bethel Depot Beer Garden
Sweet Shop	Sweet Gilead Confections
Alterations	Yardage
Massage Therapy	Star Healing
Massage Therapy	Touch of Balance
Bicycle Shop	Green Mountain Bikes
Architect	Ward Joyce Design
Snacks	Popcorn Stand
Fresh Market	Bethel Farmers Market

“The historic Blossom Block needed a lot of work, it was a massive project to undertake. So much of the town was vacant that one more empty building didn’t make a difference. Now that there is so much going on downtown, it’s time to rehab the building. The other business owners on the block and I got together to talk about what we could do. I decided that I had the skills and energy to take on the project.”

-Kevin Barry, Owner of the Blossom Block

Downtown Improvements



3 Types of Projects

Examples During Bethel Better Block Weekend

Traffic Calming, Safety & Streetscape

Transit shelter
Enhanced crosswalks

New bus route
Bike/ walk lane

Parklets to extend spaces for people into the parking lane
Curb bulb outs & islands to shorten crossing distances

Quality of Life & Community Building

Pocket parks
Directional signs
Outdoor sidewalk games

Benches & seating
Children's space
Little free library & public art

Historic photos of Bethel outdoor installation
Groups hikes and runs through Bethel's town forest

Economic Opportunities

Pop-up businesses
Farmer's market

Food vendor stands
Outdoor beer garden with live music

The Better Block Model: Mission and Purpose

The Better Block approach was created in Dallas in 2010, by community members who were tired of waiting for the city to fix their neighborhood, so they did it themselves. Better Block focuses on taking one block, corner, or intersection in a community and totally transforming it in one day. The residents take a lead role in designing and creating a new vision for their space. A team of volunteers creates a temporary version of what they imagine the space could be. Those improvements range from street enhancements such as bike lanes and curb bulb outs to public art, pop-up businesses and outdoor games. After the weekend demonstration, the community will often work with local government to turn the improvements that worked best into permanent solutions.

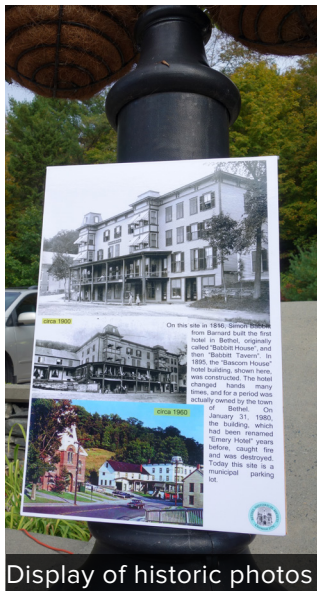


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Impacts and Results



Display of historic photos



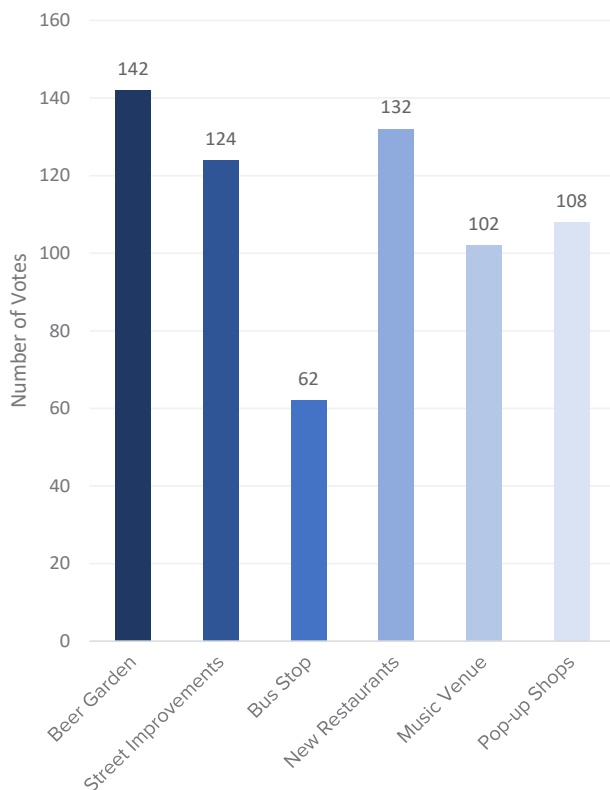
Curb bulb out and enhanced crosswalk



Blue lane and wayfinding sign

In one weekend, the downtown came alive with hundreds of people. They waited excitedly in long lines for food at the pop-up taco stand. Families enjoyed new spaces for kids to play and socialize. Enhanced crosswalks and planters led to safer conditions for pedestrians. Local artists sold their wares in vacant buildings. Neighbors chatted at picnic tables in a new pocket park, formally an overgrown lot. Over 140 people filled out a survey about their experience and their feedback shows that new eateries, street improvements, and pop-up businesses were the most popular improvements. The top 3 permanent changes people want to see are more businesses, gathering places, and outdoor seating.

Favorite Improvements from Better Block



Direct Outcomes of Better Block



\$4,881

Dollars earned by pop-up businesses



12

Number of temporary businesses during Better Block



27

Average traffic speed before Better Block



15

Average traffic speed with experimental traffic calming



Alarm Clock

Average decibel level (80) of traffic before Better Block



Quiet Library

Average decibel level (60) of traffic with traffic calming

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Next Steps

Since the event, pop-up shops and youth events have continued in the once-vacant Blossom Block. A holiday pop-up featured eight artists, drew in over a hundred shoppers and made a profit of \$3,000. The new building owner plans to rehab the building this spring and create commercial, office, and retail spaces. AARP created a video that tells the story and Team Better Block published a report on the process and outcomes. BRI members continue to build momentum and support from the community. Next, they are creating a summer project package of semi-permanent streetscape and safety improvements. Projects like Bethel Better Block take committed community members with dedication, time and vision to create the positive changes that towns in decline need. The process doesn't have to be daunting - it is a practical way to bring the community together and rapidly transform a beloved downtown.



Resources

There are many resources and partners available to support projects like Bethel Better Block in your community.

Vermont Resources:

[Agency of Commerce & Community Development](#)
[Village Center Designation Program](#)

More information about Better Block:

[Bethel Better Block](#)

[Team Better Block's step-by-step guide for putting on your own Better Block event](#)

Community engagement tools:

[World Cafe conversation model](#)

[Community asset mapping](#)

[Project For Public Spaces](#)

Contact:

[Kelly Stoddard Poor](#), 802-951-1313, AARP Vermont

[Rebecca Sanborn Stone](#), Bethel Revitalization Initiative

Type of Project: Demonstration project, community-led active placemaking

Length: Temporary, 1 weekend

Funding Source: AARP Vermont

Cost: \$25,000 which includes building materials, concept plan, build design, pre-build workshops, outreach materials, consultant fees/travel, insurance, metrics & final report.

Results: The weekend event transformed and added vibrancy to Main Street, getting residents excited about their community's future. Above all, the resident-led nature of the event ensures that the community has a say in shaping the future of the town they love.



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