



Design Tool Kit

Vermont Designated Downtowns and Village Centers

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Arts festival in downtown Waterbury.

1

The Importance of Vermont's Downtowns and Village Centers

Whether they are vibrant city centers, small downtowns, or village crossroads, Vermont's downtowns and village centers provide a distinct contribution to Vermont's brand and identity. These districts are generally mixed use areas that serve the surrounding population with goods and services, visitor attractions, governmental entities, and jobs. Not a mere museum or quaint relic of bygone days, Vermont downtowns and village centers are an essential cultural and economic center.

Vermont's downtowns and village centers define Vermont's identity and brand and play a key role in our economy. These centers have been the heart and soul of Vermont for generations. This why the state created designation programs to recognize and strengthen these areas. The state targets incentives and aligns its policies and programs to both revitalize and attract new development to designated downtowns and village centers.

By designating these areas for increased public and private investment, the state reinforces Vermont's traditional development pattern and creates places where businesses can thrive and families can live close to jobs, schools, shops and transportation options. By advancing these policies, we're not only building our economy and brand - but also protecting our working landscape and important natural resources.



Church Street Marketplace in Burlington.

1.1 A Community Gathering Place

Downtowns and village centers have always been a place for people to come together. In fact, it was the reason most downtowns and village centers were formed. Some serve as the home to government, as market centers, as manufacturing hubs, and as visitor attractions – most serve multiple roles. Today, gatherings in downtowns and village centers range from the informal exchange of neighbors at the Post Office or a lunch among coworkers at a local restaurant to larger community festivals. It is downtown where Vermont communities celebrate. Each year downtowns and village centers play host to small gatherings, large festivals, parades, and a wide array of special events. Downtowns and village centers serve as the economic, cultural and social center of our communities.



Chandler Center for the Arts in Randolph.

1.2 A Cultural and Civic Hub

Vermont downtowns and village centers are the clear center of culture for the community. Vermont downtowns and village centers are often the home to Town Halls, Meeting Houses, the community libraries, theaters, creative performance venues, galleries, and museums. Downtown and village centers are also a place to learn about the architecture of a community's past, the history of what made the place grow, and the people who made it special. Downtowns and Village Centers should remain the center of civic and cultural life. The presence of cultural and public facilities contributes to the economic vitality of downtowns and village centers across the state. Vermont's town halls, libraries, community theaters, art galleries and museums add creative energy, public discourse and economic vibrancy to the community.

1.3 A Center of Commerce

Vermont downtowns and village centers are the community's central concentration of independent retail shops, restaurants, services, and offices unrivaled in other parts of town. In fact, nearly all Vermont downtowns and village centers are the home of the largest collection of locally owned businesses in a community. Local businesses reinvest their profits in their community. As industries across the country are looking at the health of downtown's as a barometer of a community's commitment to itself, Vermont is poised to see continued growth as properties needing investment undergo renovation, vacant parcels are redeveloped, and existing properties improved.



Commercial District of Downtown Bennington.



An independent merchant in downtown Waitsfield .

1.4 An Engine for Fiscal Activity

Unlike other states where downtown evaporated during the 60's and 70's, Vermont's downtowns and village centers remained largely intact. While some communities have seen some degree of investment relocate out of downtown a simple examination of most community's grand list will reveal that the downtown district itself represents a significant portion of the property value in the community. The health of a downtown district is an imperative to the health of a governmental jurisdiction. Vermont is fortunate that the public infrastructure in downtown remains intact and worth maintaining. But maintenance is not enough; public amenities, attractive streets and sidewalks, and creative solutions to parking should not be viewed merely as expenditures, but investments in downtown that will pay dividends in the revenues generated by the private sector.

1.5 An Economic Incubator

Small businesses and microenterprises are a main source of economic vitality and employment in Vermont. Small businesses employ over 150,000 Vermonters and make up 96 percent of the businesses in the private sector. These businesses return a larger share of their investment back into the local economy and their owners are frequently highly engaged in their communities. Downtowns and village centers are ideal locations for small businesses and micro enterprise because the spaces in downtowns are highly varied in size and rental structure. Small businesses rely on interpersonal and close business connections with fellow business owners. Downtowns and village centers offer a mixture of business types ranging from retail to office to small manufacturing allowing for a synergy of activity. A farmer's market, business incubator, community supported enterprise, art studio, and independent retailer are examples of how micro-enterprise is thriving in downtowns and village centers across the state.



A retail storefront in Brattleboro with residential above.



1.6 A Residential Alternative

New and renovated housing located in downtowns has become a huge national trend—not only in big cities but also in small towns. Vermont downtowns and village centers are no exception. Many downtowns and village centers have seen new or renovated residential units locate in the community center. Nearby neighborhoods also enjoy the benefit of reinvestment because of their proximity to a downtown. Frequently, renovated and new downtown housing units are particularly appealing to young professionals and empty nesters where residents are looking for an active lifestyle in a dynamic location.

1.7 A Visitor Attraction

Tourism is a critical industry for Vermont. Shopping and dining are one of the key activities that visitors partake in when they travel. Downtowns and village centers are frequently the most often sought out destinations for these activities. Special events, markets, destination restaurants and specialty stores play host to many visitors each year whose impact on the economy is very real. Visitors to Vermont spend almost \$2.5 billion per a year and employ more than 30,000 Vermonters annually.



State and local downtown professionals on a tour of downtown Waterbury.

1.8 An Essential Partnership

The success of our downtowns and village centers doesn't happen by accident. It is the result of a collaborative effort among many partners including town leadership and volunteer boards, local chamber of commerce, downtown organizations, and regional and state entities. Many Vermont downtowns benefit from a dedicated downtown organization led by a collaboration of volunteers and in some cases a professional director wholly dedicated to making downtown successful.

The State of Vermont is committed to its downtowns and village centers. A small but highly professional staff supports economic vitality in downtowns and village centers at the state level. Dedicated funding has been allocated for downtown and village center vitality. Partner groups exist to provide additional support to the Vermont communities. These include but are certainly not limited to the Preservation Trust of Vermont, the Vermont Natural Resource Council, the center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont, the Regional Planning Commissions and the Regional Development Corporations.



Brandon Inn in Brandon.

2

The Vermont Vernacular

The state's traditional community centers range in size from tiny hamlets with a cluster of homes and a storefront or meeting house, to villages with small downtowns and residential neighborhoods, to larger urban centers such as Burlington, Montpelier, Rutland, and St. Johnsbury with vibrant downtowns.

The Vermont State statute describes a downtown as "the traditional central business district of a community that serves as the center for socioeconomic interaction, and is characterized by a cohesive core of commercial and mixed use buildings, often interspersed with civic, religious, and residential buildings and public spaces." A village center is defined as "the core of a traditional settlement, typically comprised of a cohesive mix of residential, civic, religious, commercial, and mixed use buildings, arranged along a main street and intersecting streets that are within walking distance for residents who live within and surrounding the core."

Most of Vermont's downtowns and village centers date from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century in an era where walking was a principal form of transportation and incremental growth through self-reliance was the norm. Many of the buildings constructed during this time were designed to last while others were more humble. Vermont's village centers and downtowns are cherished treasures that reflect the culture and heritage of the state.



Center Street in downtown Rutland.

2.1 Downtowns

Vermont downtowns take many different forms. Some like Barre and Burlington have a linear principal street that is gridline straight or running along a waterway like Montpelier and Brattleboro, others such as Bristol and Middlebury, and have several principal streets arranged around a green space. Downtowns are typically larger in scale than village centers and are characterized by a traditional development pattern and creates places where businesses can thrive and families can live close to jobs, schools, shops and transportation options.



Village Center in Danville.

2.2 Village Centers

Vermont village centers typically have a more rural character that is more spread out or smaller in concentration. The scale and size of village centers varies across the state. Some village centers have only a handful of shops and public buildings while others have a more pronounced center that quickly blends into the surrounding rural landscape. While others, such as Hardwick and Woodstock, have a larger critical mass of buildings either arranged along a principal main street or organized around a central community space, such as a village green or common.



2.3 Two Story Commercial

Two story commercial buildings in Vermont predominate both in smaller downtowns and village centers. Frequently, these buildings were retail on the ground floor with living space upstairs. Many two-story frame buildings remain in communities across the state but others are made of brick or stone. Well preserved two-story commercial buildings have a distinct storefront on the ground floor and smaller windows on the upper floors. These buildings provide opportunities for small business owners, artists, and other creatives to live above their business, foster entrepreneurship and ignite creativity.



Multi Story Commercial in Rutland.

2.4 Multi Story Commercial

In many larger Vermont downtowns and village centers multi-story buildings predominate though they frequently never exceed four stories in height. Communities like Brattleboro, Barre, and Montpelier have significant blocks of multi-story buildings usually constructed around the turn of the century and frequently featuring multiple bays and brick facades. Studies show that downtown, mixed-use, multi-story buildings have high value, providing up to five times the property tax revenue as conventional single-use commercial establishments on the outskirts of town.



2.5 Village Greens, Town Commons and Squares

Vermont's village greens (commons and squares) serve as the physical, historic, and cultural heart of many communities – hosting concerts, fairs, parades, seasonal festivals, and farmers markets. They provide residents and visitors a place to gather, exercise, recreate, celebrate, and engage in commerce and community. Integral to the Vermont brand, village greens and commons anchor and strengthen our communities, and make our cities and towns more attractive places to live and work. Vermont downtowns and village centers are the site of iconic green spaces like Taylor Park in St. Albans, the Common in Northfield, the village green in Woodstock and Court Square in Middlebury.

A new partnership, the Vermont Village Greens Initiative, is working to document, showcase, and revitalize these shared public spaces to assure that future generations enjoy the economic, cultural, and social benefits Vermont's village greens provide. The Village Green Initiative is reviving awareness about Vermont's village greens and the important cultural and economic role they play. For more information, about village greens and commons in Vermont, visit http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities/opportunities/revitalization/village_greens



Terminating Vista along Stowe Street in Waterbury.

2.6 Terminating Vistas

One remarkable feature of many Vermont downtowns and village centers are the terminating vista at the end of a principal street. Whether it is the iconic First Unitarian Universalist Church in Burlington, the Federal Style Reservoir building at the end of Stowe Street in Waterbury, or the Youth Triumphant Statue in Barre terminating vistas create a unique feature of downtowns and village centers across the state.



City Hall in Montpelier.



Barre City Hall.

2.7 Civic Buildings

Most Vermont downtowns and village centers have iconic civic buildings dating from as early as the late 18th century to the early 20th century. These buildings were constructed to reflect the prosperity and pride that each community had. Consequently, they range from modest meeting houses in small village centers to grand city halls and public libraries in prominent downtown locations.



Village Green Market in New Haven.

2.8 The Country Store

For many villages in Vermont, the country store is the single most important building in the community. It can serve as a meeting place, a post office, a place to buy day-to-day necessities, and the source of news about the community. Country stores are the cornerstone of many communities, offering a place of commerce and community in Vermont's small downtowns and village centers.



Stone Wall in Warren.



Sculpted granite bike rack in Barre.

2.9 Stonework

Stonework is very common in Vermont's village centers and downtowns. Whether it is stacked stone on a bridge abutment in Warren, stone buildings in many downtowns and village centers, or carved granite and marble in statuary, curbing, and bridges stone is a very frequent feature of downtowns and village centers across the state. Vermont's stonework is a cultural legacy of the granite, marble, and stone industry across the state.



Downtown Bristol.

3

Education and Outreach

One of the most important roles a community can do to make good design happen is by encouraging and promoting quality design in their downtown and village center. A local town's planning commission or development review board, the regional planning commission, the downtown organization's design committee or the local design community are great resources to provide educational and outreach opportunities. Education can take many forms and provides a way to engage the public, property owners, investors, and shopkeepers about the importance of design in making a vibrant downtown and village center.



Downtown Springfield street scene.



3.1 The Main Street Approach

The National Main Street Center has developed the Main Street Four Point Approach® as a grass roots approach to downtown revitalization that provides a framework to build community pride, foster investment in downtown, and encourage partnerships for ongoing success. The Main Street Four Point Approach® uses the following:

- **Organization** - Establishing and maintaining a non-profit organization or appointed municipal commission that works in partnership with the public and private sectors to plan and implement a comprehensive downtown revitalization strategy.
- **Economic Restructuring** - Strengthening and improving a downtown's economic assets and fulfilling its broadest market potential.
- **Design** - Enhancing and improving the physical appearance of a downtown by addressing all design elements to create an appealing environment.
- **Promotion** - Creating and marketing a positive image of the downtown district and attracting people to socialize, shop at local businesses and restaurants, and enjoy local history and culture.

Ideally each of the points will have a committee of volunteers from a cross section of the community to champion the initiatives.



3.2 The Design Committee

Vermont Designated Downtowns are required to have an organization or municipal commission that supports the Main Street Four Point Approach. These downtown organizations and commissions create a design committee to support the community revitalization efforts. The Design Committee plays a pivotal role in community appearance. The committee, working hand-in-hand with partner committees, the local government, private investors, and other partners can have a critical influence on quality of downtown improvements. Many design committees work on beautification projects, others manage façade improvement programs, still others commission design studies and champion overall plans. A well-organized design committee should have a program of work that looks at short, medium, and long-term steps to overall design quality in a community.



Downtown Northfield.

3.3 The Importance of Design

The importance of urban design cannot be underestimated and the examples are too numerous to mention. In sum, good design adds value to a downtown by creating a place where people want to be. High design quality emphasizes making places people love, and includes connecting to and embracing assets in your downtown or village center for public use and public life. The quality of the public environment can make the pedestrian experience memorable, creating a positive image, a sense of community pride, a desire to linger and a desire to return.

Design is the craft of making sure that deliberate decisions are made in the built form that contributes to the quality of a community and adds lasting value. In Vermont, the earliest builders of communities contemplated design: whether it was the location of a church on a town green, the sturdy craftsmanship of a covered bridge, or even the humble store front in a village, design played a role in making sure that each building, public park, sidewalk, and street contributed in some way to the improvement of the place people called home.

In communities, design reinforces the history of a place, facilitates community interaction, supports economic development, and encourages quality investment that will last for generations.



Resource team on a walkabout in Barre.

3.4 Walkabouts

One of the most effective ways of learning about design is to move out of the conference room and into the street. Just walking through an area can provide volunteers and citizens an opportunity to slow down and really study their community. Pointing out architectural details, streetscape features, public gathering places, signs, and art provide a way to see the community in a new light. A good look at the community should reveal both the design assets and challenges in a place.

3.5 Awards

Recognizing property owners, businesses, volunteers, and public agencies who work on good design through awards is a time tested way to educate the community, bring attention to good design, and encourage others to follow the lead of those implementing good design in the community.

3.6 Training

Training programs can provide a great resource for a community. From learning how to clean brick to what kind of trees are suitable in a downtown or village center setting provide opportunities to engage and educate the community. These programs can be informal gatherings and meetings or more organized events that welcome the public. Some training ideas include:

- Design Committee Training
- Principles of Infill Design
- Creating Great Public Spaces (Parks, Plazas, Trails, Open Spaces, etc.)
- Design as an Agent for Community Change
- Making a Great Façade – Grants and Tools

For more information about training opportunities, contact Richard Amore, richard.amore@state.vt.us with the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development.



Public meeting in Wilmington.

3.7 Public Events Scavenger Hunts

Public events can take on a more fun and dynamic approach. Scavenger hunts to find architectural details and public art to historic walking tours provide a way for people from the community to see it in a new light.

3.8 Building and Photo Inventories

Building inventories and photo collections of a community are another way to collect and understand the design details of a place. These photos can be categorized by locale or by topic: windows, storefronts, awnings, signs, green space. Building photo inventories are also a great method to document changes over time and raise design awareness in your downtown and village center.



City Hall Park in Downtown Barre.

4

Public and Private Properties

Principals of good design are easy to understand and should be implemented on public properties such as streets, sidewalks, open spaces, and parks; on private properties whether they are improved storefronts, façades, or new development; and where downtowns and village centers connect to nearby neighborhoods. This section will provide a broad overview of good design principles for each area.



4.1 Existing Buildings

Attractive building facades are one of the most important components of a downtown or village center. Facades welcome customers, provide for display of merchandise, and denote that a commercial district exists. Some simple design principals should be followed:

- Whenever possible have an active storefront with display windows and doors.
- Pay attention to the color of adjacent buildings. Often, downtowns and village centers look their best when buildings follow a color scheme that takes complementary colors and places them next to one another.
- Use different colors to accent architectural details of a building.
- Signs should fit within existing signboards. Many commercial buildings were designed to incorporate signage. These spaces should be respected when new signs are installed. Creative and well crafted signs will have a strong impact on the community.
- Awnings should fit within existing openings.
- Pay attention to the building from top to bottom. Most commercial buildings follow a classical design pattern with a base, a middle, and a top (called the cornice).



Sensitive Infill Development on the Burlington Waterfront.

4.2 New Development

Some key design elements of infill and new development in a downtown or village center are:

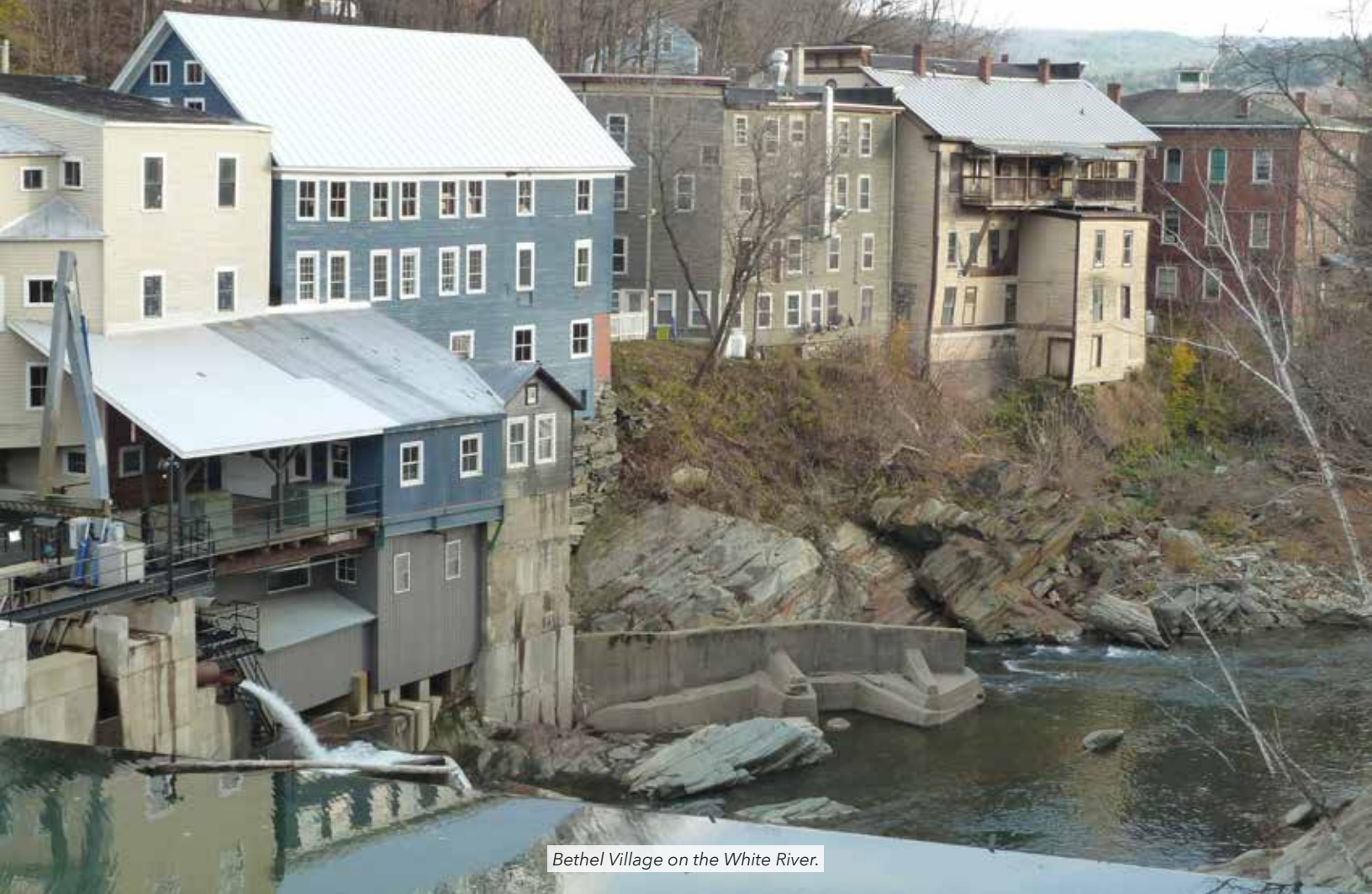
- Orient the building to the street edge. Buildings should respond directly to the street in most downtowns and many village centers. In some cases (especially in more rural areas) a front yard may be a component of the building.
- Have your main entrance open onto the public sidewalk.
- Place parking to the rear of a building when possible.
- Buildings should create active street frontages with doors and windows oriented towards the sidewalk. Long blank walls, without windows and doors interrupt the flow of a commercial district.
- In the case of multiple buildings, new development should respect and create a relationship among them. Sometimes this is simply respecting the adjacent buildings design, other times buildings can be connected together with open spaces, plazas, and gathering spots.
- New development should follow appropriate scale and rhythm within the district. New development should be sensitive to the historic architecture and surrounding context. This can be done even with a contemporary style infill building.



4.3 Public Realm

The public realm is the space between the structures in a community. It is the street, the parks, the open spaces, the sidewalks, and the plazas. The public realm should consider the following design elements:

- Improvements like plantings, street trees, and public art greatly enhance the public realm. These can range from modest impromptu art installations to grand statues and from detailed gardens to simple flower boxes.
- Streets should focus primarily on the pedestrian in the Vermont downtown and village center. Crosswalks, sidewalks, and a comfortable walking environment are critical to the success of a vibrant commercial center.
- Sidewalks can incorporate details such as brick or granite but that isn't a requirement for a quality street – simple concrete that clearly identifies where the pedestrian can feel comfortable is enough in many communities.
- Street furniture should be of high quality and designed to last. These investments should thoughtfully consider community character.



Bethel Village on the White River.

4.4 Resilient Downtowns and Villages

Vermont downtowns, by and large, were built near water. It was the life source for early settlement and an important feature of many communities. Consequently, floods have been a factor in downtowns for hundreds of years. Tropical Storm Irene and the spring floods of 2012 highlighted the vulnerability of Vermont's downtowns and village centers to flooding.

While it is impractical and unthinkable to relocate Vermont's communities away from the water that defines them, incorporating flood resilience strategies can ameliorate future damage. Items such as rain gardens, pervious pavement, and thoughtful retrofitting of buildings to withstand a flood event all contribute to a more resilient and environmentally sensitive downtown. In addition, a critical tool in making our downtowns and village centers more resilient is by protecting and restoring existing floodplains and wetlands up stream. For more information, about how to reduce flood risk to downtowns and village centers, visit Vermont's Flood Ready website, http://floodready.vermont.gov/improve_infrastructure/adapt_infrastructure

Some steps to floodproof buildings by:

- Relocating major furnace and water heating systems above flood level.
- Installing water resistant electrical cables.
- Floodproofing and sealing holes.
- Installing backflow valves into sewer and septic lines.
- Floors resistant to hydrostatic pressure to resist buckling during a flood event.
- High perimeter walls of the foundation that rise above the floor slab.
- Impact protection on vulnerable building faces and corners that prevent debris from damaging the building.
- Water resistant construction material that acknowledges that water may penetrate a space but can minimize damage to the building such as replacing gypsum wallboard with cement board.
- Floodgates and door dams at doorways and windows that can be raised in the event of a storm.
- Installing a discharge pump to help remove water during a flood.



Bioswales at the Brattleboro Co-op.

4.5 Green Stormwater Infrastructure

Many of Vermont historic downtowns and village centers are located along rivers and in floodplains. Typically, these sites relate to a town or region's economy and contribute to the attractive character of these historic commercial centers. However, the result is an urgent need to address stormwater, improve water quality and mitigate flooding through Green Stormwater Infrastructure and other flood mitigation strategies. Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI) relies on natural and semi-natural systems to infiltrate, treat and store water in dispersed locations throughout the landscape, and can make our communities more resilient. Green infrastructure helps retain and/or reuse stormwater and is often less costly and more environmentally friendly than traditional stormwater treatment. Green stormwater infrastructure can be incorporated into downtowns and village centers to improve water quality, reduce the risk of flooding and add vibrancy to the streetscape. Some GSI solutions include:

- Permeable pavement, sidewalks, and parking lots.
- Rain gardens, bioswales, and planter boxes in streetscapes and in parking lots.
- Street trees (and perhaps Silva Cells) that provide on-site stormwater management.
- Green roofs can reduce volume and velocity of stormwater runoff.
- Rain Barrels or Cisterns.



Downtown Neighborhood in Brandon.

4.6 Neighborhood Design and Revitalization

Neighborhoods are critical to the success of downtowns and village centers. Fortunately, Vermont's communities have preserved surrounding neighborhoods and reintroduced housing (both affordable and market rate) into vacant upper floors in downtowns and village centers.

Vermont offers a Neighborhood Development Area designation that encourages municipalities and/or developers to plan for new and infill housing in the area within walking distance of its designated downtown and village center. The goal is that "rooftops" and the people that inhabit these homes are the economic engines of the downtown and village center. For more information about the Neighborhood Development Area designation, visit: http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities/opportunities/revitalization/vermont_neighborhoods.



A variety of Vermont community brands.

4.7 Community Branding and Marketing

Often overlooked, consistent marketing and branding can go a long way in reinforcing the design of a community. Community branding is an essential part of fostering the sense of place that keeps residents interested in downtown and that makes the community an attractive destination for visitors, potential residents and investors. Good community branding can have a number of positive impacts: it can increase exposure for existing businesses and be a recruitment tool in building a more complimentary business mix. It can also boost retail traffic and attract residents to the downtown area. Successful branding can aid downtown and community organizations, increasing both volunteerism and giving, by increasing the credibility of revitalization efforts.

A well-crafted community branding system can promote a downtown/village center and support its vitality. Community branding could create logos, taglines and environmental graphics such as wayfinding signs and gateways that are consistent with the community brand, and be informative to residents and visitors alike. Individual businesses can cultivate their own brand with thoughtful storefronts, well-crafted signs, and inviting places to welcome customers.



Retail merchandise in Brandon.

4.8 Visual Audits

A visual audit is a way for a downtown or village center to take stock not only of what the storefronts look like from the exterior but also to examine the merchandising “behind the display window.” While a storefront may look nice on the exterior, the interior merchandising drives consumer sales and creates stronger browsing atmosphere for a downtown or village center. Frequently, visual audits are done by visual merchandising professionals who can provide advice to shopkeepers. A visual audit could also happen through an “exchange” program between two experienced merchants in different communities to avoid the awkwardness of a “self assessment” of a storefront. The result of the visual audit would be guidance on merchandising, visual displays, and decor to create a more inviting environment to shop and dine.



Examples of maintenance issues.





4.9 The Importance of Maintenance

Regular maintenance helps to preserve buildings and property, protect real estate values and investments and keeps downtowns and village centers attractive places to live, work and visit. Maintaining and repairing historic buildings are essential parts of downtown revitalization.

A community only gets one chance to make a first impression. Those impressions are very important to a visitor when entering a downtown. The appearance of the buildings, the streets, sidewalks, the streetscape all are factors in the decision making process of whether a visitor will stop and visit or just keep driving on to the next community.

Maintaining and repairing downtown buildings and streetscapes are essential parts of downtown revitalization. It's what keeps downtown vibrant. A building is typically an owner's largest single investment. One of the best ways to help a building retain its value in the community is to implement a regular and preventive maintenance schedule. The cost of maintaining a building is substantially less than having to rehabilitate a building due to lack of maintenance. Maintenance is preservation.

Simple maintenance tasks quickly become large renovation problems if left unattended. Lack of regular upkeep can result in accelerated deterioration of building elements and features. Buildings that are not maintained do not contribute to the Buildings that are poorly maintained project a negative image of your community and can slow down your revitalization efforts.

Many communities have developed creative ways to help maintain buildings whether through facade grants (mentioned separately in this toolkit), events like "A Quart and a Pint" that get volunteers out to do improvements and celebrate with local craft beer, or before and after renderings to show what a building could look like with improvement.



Parklet in Montpelier.

4.10 Placemaking

Placemaking is a way to make your village or downtown a better place to live and work by transforming underutilized public spaces into vibrant community places. As a place becomes more desirable and welcoming, property values increase, businesses thrive and vitality returns. Turning a parking lot into a farmer's market or food truck rally. Attracting people to a little-used park to gather, play or listen to music. Brightening up a vacant lot or underutilized space. Envisioning how a block can be revitalized or how a parking space can become a parklet. This is Placemaking.

Placemaking is a community and economic development strategy that capitalizes on local assets to create appealing and unique places where people want to live, work and play. Many of Vermont's downtowns and village centers are undertaking placemaking initiatives from a parklet in Montpelier, to a pop-up park in Middlebury, or food truck rallies in Burlington and art installations in Brattleboro.



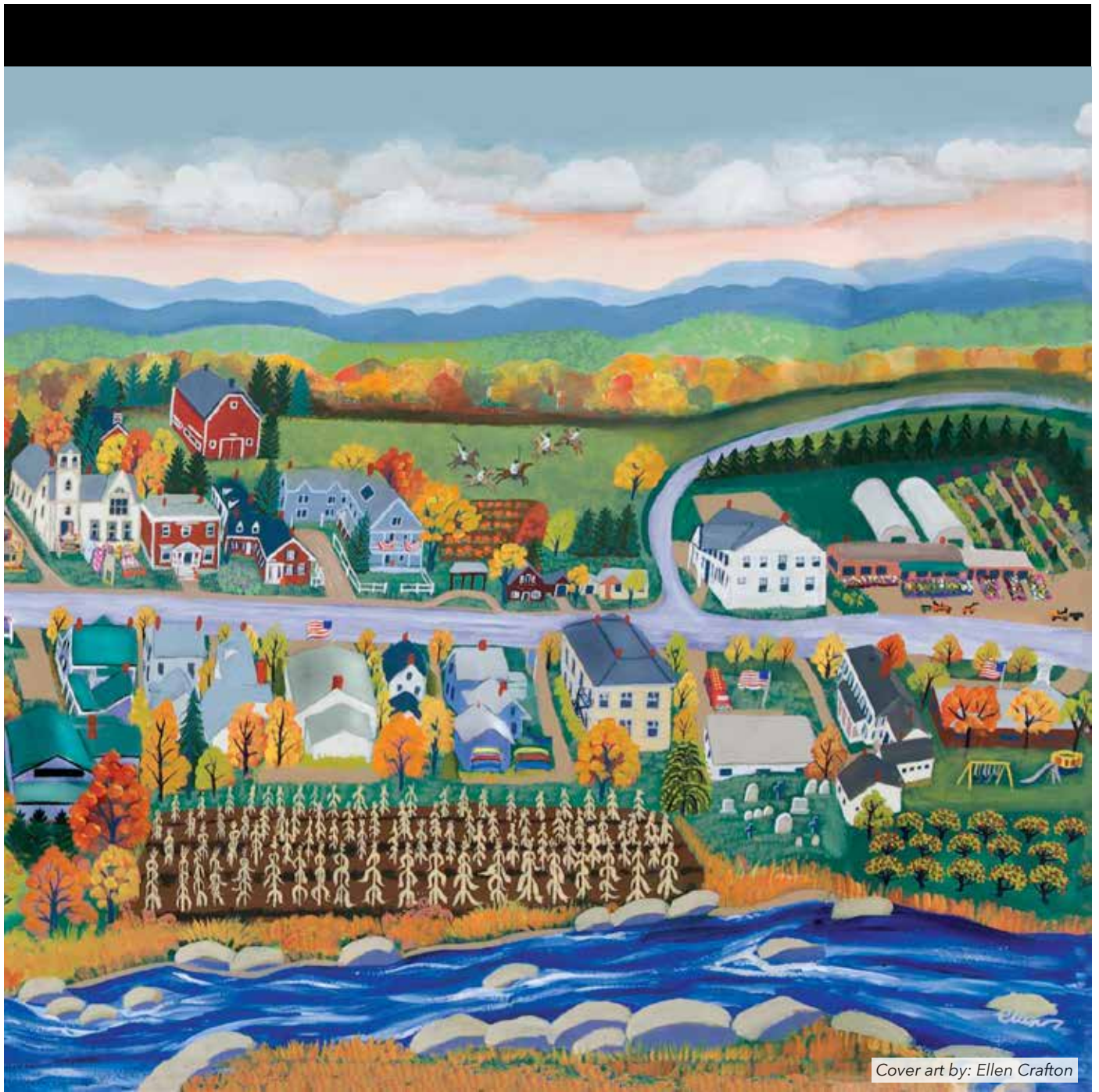
Aldrich Building in Barre.

5

Planning

Planning play a significant role in whether or not communities create well-designed villages and downtowns that attract residents, businesses, and visitors. Both people and businesses are attracted to vibrant downtowns and village centers that are committed to developing quality places that are designed and planned well.

Vermont's primary land use goal is "To plan development so as to maintain the historic settlement pattern of compact village and urban centers separated by rural countryside." Vermont's landscape of compact centers surrounded by rural land is integral to our economy, community spirit and what makes our state distinctive.



Cover art by: Ellen Crafton

Waitsfield Town Plan

Adopted October 22, 2012

Waitsfield Town Plan cover.



5.1 Planning Tools

The Municipal Plan - If there is any single document that is essential to defining and implementing a community's roadmap for the future, it is the municipal plan. The plan is a guide for accomplishing community aspirations and intentions through public investments, land use regulations and other implementation programs, such as village center master plans, zoning bylaws and downtown improvement districts. The municipal plan can set the stage for future downtown/village center improvements and strengthen the connection between town planning and community revitalization. The municipal plan serves as a long term guide, a basis for community programs and tax payer investment, a basis for municipal regulatory action, a source of information about the community, and a source for community standards in regulatory proceedings at the state and regional levels.

Downtown and Village Center Master Plans - These present a community-driven vision of the built environment for a downtown/village center for the next 10 years. Frequently, these plans are illustrative in nature and address detailed improvement strategies for both the public realm and the private sector. A successful master plan will also include an extensive public engagement process. Frequently, these plans can range from the highly visionary long-term plans to an immediate master plan for a highly specific geography.

Neighborhood Plans - These can impact downtowns and village centers as well because healthy downtown neighborhoods contribute to a strong central business district. Neighborhood plans engage neighbors in a process to evaluate ways to enhance their community through improved connectivity, rehabilitation of ageing housing stock, or additional housing, and the introduction or improvement of parks and open spaces.



Sensitive Infill Development on Main Street in Burlington.



5.2 Regulatory Tools

Regulatory tools are one of the key methods to implement the municipal plan. Traditional zoning bylaws is the most common way that communities have regulated land and property development in the community. Zoning, by and large, dictates the use of property as well as the placement of structures on land. More recently, form-based codes has replaced or been used along with traditional zoning as a regulatory tool. Rather than concentrating on use, form-based code examines the design qualities of development to ensure compatibility with the surrounding areas. Some communities have created a hybrid of traditional and form based codes.

While zoning regulates the use of property, communities can enact maintenance ordinances that regulate the condition of properties. Building codes are nearly universally used to ensure life and safety issues in newly constructed or renovated public or commercial buildings.



State and local downtown advocates at annual training retreat.

5.3 State Designation Programs

Vermont's landscape of compact centers surrounded by rural land is integral to our economy, community spirit and brand. Vermont has established a unique framework of "designations" that recognize these centers and provides incentives to encourage communities to maintain and augment them. Vermont has five designation programs, downtown, village center, new town center, neighborhood development area, and growth center designation. These programs also help align our environmental, housing, and transportation policies, programs, regulations, and public investments to maintain and enhance the landscape cherished by Vermonters and visitors alike. State designation employs two powerful concepts for improving communities:

- Targeting our limited resources to invest in places where it can do the most good.
- Aligning those resources in places where state, regional and local policies agree that investment should occur.

This harnesses efforts of government at all levels, pooling resources to help restore historic buildings, create safe and pleasant pedestrian streets, revive local businesses, strengthens the economy, and build neighborhoods that meet community needs.



Existing design in Waitsfield.



Design Concept.

5.4 Design Guidance

Many communities provide some degree of design guidance within designated areas (typically but not exclusively historic areas). Some communities use design review boards, design control district or local historic districts overseen by a reviewing body that will ensure that the design of renovations or new construction is in keeping with the community's desired appearance.

Some communities opt to prepare a design guidelines or a "pattern book" that provides guidance for development without regulatory power. Design Guidelines and pattern books offer a way for smaller communities to influence quality investment without creating a regulatory body.



Morrisville.

6

Motivating Good Design – Incentives

There are many ways to encourage good design for Vermont's downtowns and village centers. These range from local initiatives to state grants and loans to federal programs. The following list is designed to provide an overview of incentives and opportunities that can assist village center and downtown revitalization efforts. The list is not exhaustive, but provides guidance on opportunities for Vermont communities.



Community presentation Barre.

6.1 Key partners

Many of the state grant programs provide dedicated staff that provide technical assistance to downtowns and village centers seeking to make improvements to their communities. The State Designation Program provides even more access to training, one-on-one consultation, and advanced assistance with funding to help revitalize your downtown or village center. Local municipalities and regional planning commissions are key partners for the success of your downtown and village center. Some other key partners include, but are certainly not limited to, the Preservation Trust of Vermont, the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont, the Vermont Natural Resource Council, the Regional Planning Commissions, and the Regional Development Corporations.

Private sector partners are also critical to the success of any downtown or village center program. These partners can range from key property owners, generous individuals and families, corporate partners, and private foundations.



Main Street in Waitsfield. (Current condition)



Main Street in Waitsfield. (Potential rendering)

6.2 Local Tools

Vermont towns, villages, and cities can encourage good design through incentives at the local level. These incentives cover a wide array of potential services and funds and can be scaled to suit the budget and size of the community. Among the most frequently used local tools are:

- **Design services** - Design services from local professionals is an excellent tool to provide assistance to local business and property owners when they explore renovating a building or creating a great window display. Some communities provide a stipend for a design professional consultation.
- **Façade Grants** - Façade grants can take many forms. The most common façade grant is an ongoing fund that provides a matching grant to private property owners seeking to invest in their buildings. The grants vary widely in amount depending on the size and budget of a community. Other façade grants focus on a particular component of a building such as awnings, signs, or doors. The most advanced form of façade grant uses an easement with a number of buildings to create multiple façade renovations in a short period of time.
- **Loan Programs** - Some communities provide loan pools for building improvement with favorable terms, second position financing to secure traditional bank financing, and revolving loans.
- **Easements** - Easements provide private property owners ways to expand the use of their buildings. Many easements allow for outdoor dining and merchandising.
- **Downtown Improvement Districts (DID)** - DIDs are special assessments made on downtowns where the additional tax revenues are dedicated to improvements within that district.

6.3 Vermont Tools

The State of Vermont offers an array of tools and incentives to encourage investment in downtowns and village centers throughout the state. Some of these are linked to downtown and village center designation; others are linked to Federal programs, and some are stand-alone programs. The following is not designed to be an exhaustive inventory but rather a synopsis of tools available:

- **Downtown and Village Center Tax Credit** - State investment tax credit for qualified historic rehabilitation, façade, code and technology upgrades for properties constructed before 1983 located within a Designated Downtown or Village Center.
http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities/opportunities/funding/downtown_village_tax_credit
- **Sales Tax Reallocation Program** - Municipalities and the developer of a qualified project may jointly apply for a reallocation of sales taxes on construction materials. Qualified projects must be located within a Designated Downtown and reallocated taxes must be used by the municipality to support the qualified project. Projects are awarded on a competitive basis.
http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities/opportunities/funding/salestaxreallocation
- **Community Development Block Grant Program** - The Community Development Block Grant Program can fund an array of improvements for downtowns including the following:
http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities/opportunities/funding/vcdp
 - **Accessibility Modification Grants** - Federal grants to bring existing municipal buildings and non-school libraries into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
 - **Implementation Grants** - Federal grants for economic development, housing, public facilities, and public services that will benefit low/moderate income individuals, eliminate slums or blight, or address an urgent need.
 - **Planning Grants** - Federal grants for community development planning, downtown planning studies, and project development to benefit people with low to moderate incomes and/or eliminate "slums and blight."
- **Downtown Transportation Fund** - State grants for municipalities to finance transportation-related capital improvements in support of economic development, within or serving a Designated Downtown, including construction or alteration of roads and highways, parking facilities, pedestrian and streetscape improvement, rail or bus facilities or equipment, and underground relocation of electric utility, cable and telecommunications lines.
http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities/opportunities/funding/downtown_transportation_fund
- **Municipal Planning Grants** - State grants for a wide range of municipal planning projects including municipal land use plans, zoning and subdivision bylaws, designated downtown, village and neighborhood planning.
http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities/opportunities/funding/overview/municipal_planning_grants
- **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program** - Provides grants to implement long-term hazard mitigation actions that reduce structure damage or loss of life due to natural disasters. Examples include upsizing culverts, elevating or floodproofing buildings, property acquisitions/demolitions, and mitigation planning.
<http://vem.vermont.gov/mitigation/applications/>
- **Federal Rehabilitation Investment Tax Credit** - Federal investment tax credit for 20% of the rehabilitation costs (including labor, materials and architects or other consultant fees) for income-producing buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
<http://www.nps.gov/tps/tax-incentives.htm>
- **State Historic Preservation Grants** - State 50:50 matching grants for the repair and restoration of historic buildings listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places in Vermont.
http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities/preservation/grants/historic_preservation
- **Certified Local Government Program** - Federal grants available for resource identification and planning, National Register nominations, downtown planning, public education, archeological studies, and building feasibility studies.
http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities/preservation/planning/clgp

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- **Brownfield Revitalization Fund** - Grants and loans for remediation of brownfield sites. The funds are made available to Vermont by the EPA and eligible applicants can be private developers, non-profits and municipalities.
http://accd.vermont.gov/business/relocate_expand/capital/brownfields
 - **Cultural Facilities Grant Program** - Matching state grants to improve community facilities used to provide cultural activities to the public to enhance or expand the capacity of an existing building to provide cultural programming.
<http://www.vermontartscouncil.org/grants-and-services/organizations/cultural-facilities>
 - **Human Services and Educational Facilities Grant Program** - Matching state grants for capital costs associated with the major maintenance, renovation, and development of facilities used for human services and health care, or educational opportunities.
<http://bgs.vermont.gov/formsandpublications>
 - **Regional Economic Development Grant Program** - Matching state grants to stimulate the creation and development or retention of economic development of individual or regional Vermont communities.
<http://bgs.vermont.gov/formsandpublications>
 - **ANR Recreational Trails Grant Program** - State 80:20 matching grants for the maintenance, restoration, design and construction of recreational trails.
<http://fpr.vermont.gov/recreation/grants/rtp>
 - **Recreational Facilities Grants Program** - Matching state grants for capital costs associated with the development and creation of community recreational opportunities.
<http://bgs.vermont.gov/home>
 - **ANR Ecosystem Restoration Grant Program** - State grants for the design and construction projects that target nonpoint sources of pollution that cause or contribute to the state's surface waters.
<http://www.watershedmanagement.vt.gov/grants.htm>
 - **ANR Caring for Canopy Grant Program** - State 50:50 grants to help communities care for tree canopy by taking the necessary actions to developing and sustaining a community-wide tree program, including tree plantings, inventories, maintenance, and planning.
http://fpr.vermont.gov/forest/community_forests/community_canopy_grants
 - **VTrans Transportation Alternative Program** - State 80:20 matching grants for the construction, planning, and design of bike and pedestrian facilities (on or off road), sidewalks, bicycle infrastructure, lighting, and others.
<http://vtransengineering.vermont.gov/bureaus/mab/local-projects/transportation-alternatives>
 - **VTrans Bicycle and Pedestrian Program** - State 90:10 matching grants for the scoping, design, and construction of bike and pedestrian facilities, sidewalks, bicycle lanes, crosswalks, shared-use paths, and lighting.
<http://vtransengineering.vermont.gov/bureaus/mab/local-projects/bike-ped>
 - **VTrans/ACCD Strong Communities, Better Connections Program** - State 90:10 matching grants for planning that align land use planning and community revitalization with transportation investments.
<http://vtransplanning.vermont.gov/programs/scbc>
 - **State Infrastructure Bank** - The State Infrastructure Bank (SIB) program, operated by the Vermont Economic Development Authority (VEDA) in conjunction with the Vermont Agency of Transportation (AOT) and the Federal Highway Administration, is available to assist in the construction or reconstruction of highways, roads and bridges, and pedestrian facilities, as well as certain capital facilities related to rail transit or public transit. Also, in certain cases, infrastructure for electric vehicle charging stations and natural gas refueling stations available for public use are eligible for SIB financing.
<http://www.veda.org/financing-options/other-financing-option/state-infrastructure-bank-program/>

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This report includes those communities and many others across Vermont to illustrate the opportunities for good design as way to foster community revitalization and economic prosperity.

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For more information about the design toolkit or downtown/village center design please visit http://accd.vermont.gov/strong_communities or contact Richard Amore, richard.amore@state.vt.us or (802) 828-5229.

