

Valley Futures Network: Structure Group

In Collaboration with:
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The Valley Futures Network

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1. SWOT Analysis:

This analysis is drawn from survey results, observations during meetings, retreats, and online conversations, VFN website and VFN Listserv.

1.1 Strengths:

- The VFN occupies the same niche as many other organizations in the area, but is focused on relatively the same goals. The network works in tandem with these other groups and they "scratch each other's backs." These groups include the MRV Planning group, MRPA, MRVCC, Carbon Shredders, FOMR, MRWCP, CVCLT, Catamount Trail, town conservation committees, and Green Mountain Global Forum.
- The VFN provides a forum for learning, discussion, sharing, and networking.
- The VFN helps other groups form and take off, such as the Mad River Path Association.
- The network has a very welcoming atmosphere and some members report feeling comfortable and not intimidated from taking a leadership role. The informal organization is very flexible and members share the load of work depending on the amount of time they have to offer.
- The network builds social capital.
- The network members are committed, and really care about their home, their community, and want to be involved. Members are generally seen as very capable and skilled.
- The network modifies its agenda to meet the needs of the community.
- The network provides a place of networking for people in the valley who are interested in certain issues.
- The network continues to attract new members, who are generally welcomed at meetings.
- Meetings are well-publicized, and attendees are comfortable sharing new ideas at meetings and feel like their participation and contributions are valuable.
- Retreats are effective in attracting and retaining members.
- Members have a variety of involvement. Some participants are going to weekly breakfasts or using the email list every week and others only attend the retreats, once a year. The majority of people are only retreat attendees and members may not have that consistency and time dedication that they may want.

1.2 Weaknesses:

- Many voices in the community are not being heard, and without these voices the VFN cannot truly set goals that are in the best interest of the entire community.
- The VFN is excluding many groups and demographics, including the town of Moretown, the more disadvantaged in the community, multi-generational residents, farmers, senior citizens, historical societies, mechanics, service and club groups such as the Masons and Odd Fellows, some churches, the Business Builders group, Rootswork, Food Shelf, the rural resource commission, Valley Players, Mad River Riders, Rotary, School PTAs, Farmer's Market, Yestermorrow, Green Mountain Cultural Center, Mad River Chorale, and the labor class of people.
- There is an impression that the organization is myopic, only appealing to like-minded individuals instead of more diverse members of the community.
- The VFN has a very small age range of participants. From those surveyed, all participants were between the age of 40 and 50, with the exception of one 32 year old and one 60 year old. The VFN does not have representation from the younger or senior citizen population.

- There is an impression that membership is slow to grow.
- Most members became involved because of retreats, but few members became involved through other ways. Retreat participants were specifically invited, rather than getting involved because of their own interest.
- Members have a variety of involvement. Some participants are going to weekly breakfasts or using the email list every week and others only attend the retreats, once a year. The majority of people are only retreat attendees and members may not have that consistency and time dedication that they may want.
- Some members surveyed felt that the network didn't respect opinions outside of a core group.
- Many members don't seem to know what the VFN is about, or feel like they know enough to comment on the VFN in general. There was a divide in answers about what the role of the VFN was. One group thought they were a group to "help" the valley and another group saw the network as a group to focus on sustainability.
- There is some feeling that the organization is stagnant, lacking focus and strategy, and that it is only about talking and sharing ideas. Members feel frustrated at a lack of concrete projects to work on.
- Some members feel that the same people are always involved, rather than involving new people.
- Some members feel that issues they focus on aren't always seen as "immediate" problems.
- When asked what role VFN plays, many members mentioned things involving "helping" the valley. This attitude can turn people away who are given the impression that something is wrong with the valley.
- Communication with community members outside the organization needs improvement.

1.3 Opportunities:

- There are many projects that community members would like to see the VFN address, including affordable housing; affordable, local food; agriculture; education; energy; the environment; the local economy; employment; transportation; homelessness; teen and youth outreach; and planning for the future.
- Other possible projects include creating a structure for the organization, creating a core set of projects, working with the local Chamber of Commerce, working with the Mad River Path, addressing the "culture of arrogance" in government officials, reducing energy use in schools and public buildings, and building an infrastructure that encourages walking.
- Members of the community want to have an organization like the VFN working in the community, providing non-traditional community leadership.
- Other community organizations outside the Mad River Valley can provide inspiration and support.
- Other organizations within the Mad River Valley can use the support of the VFN.
- Outreach to non-VFN community members, through retreats, member support, and other events.

1.4 Threats:

- The VFN could lose community support by not including a wide range of community members and groups in the valley.
- There are many members of the community who seem to oppose or are apathetic to the VFN.
- Other organizations within the community occupy a similar niche.
- There is a perspective of elitism from some community members.

2. Case Studies

2.1 Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative

Roxbury, MA

www.dsni.org

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative began as an organization to revitalize the Dudley Street neighborhood from a variety of perspectives, including physical, economic, environmental, and human growth. Their goal was to improve the neighborhood without displacing current residents, as is often the case when poor areas are revitalized. Through engagement of the various ethnic and community groups in the neighborhood, the organization was able to purchase vacant lots by having been granted the power of eminent domain by the City of Boston. They then put those lots under the authority of a community land trust where they were used for affordable housing and mixed-use development. The Initiative establishes strict guidelines for the use of these lots. Funding for this project was found in local and regional groups, large financial organizations, and philanthropic organizations.

The DSNI is focusing on sustainable development for lower economic families, intending on creating an "urban village" where residents are able to "live, shop, work, and play." This includes the development of community centers, playgrounds, parks, community gardens, locally-owned businesses, entertainment, and employers.

For the VFN:

The key to the success of the DSNI is their engagement of all of the members of the community, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, or financial status. Each group was approached and asked to contribute, as well as told what the benefits that supporting the organization would bring. Meetings, group communication, and announcements are multi-lingual, in order to be as inclusive as possible to community members. The VFN would do well to communicate with other members of the community and to identify their needs and wants to attempt to engage them in their vision of development within the Mad River Valley.

2.2 Center for an Agricultural Economy

Hardwick, VT

www.hardwickagriculture.org

The Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE) is a non-profit 501(C)(3) tax-exempt organization that seeks to create a locally based 21st century healthy food system in Hardwick. The CAE was founded in 2004 by Andrew Meyer, owner of Vermont Natural Coatings, a whey-based varnish company, and Vermont Soy, an organic soy drink and tofu company. Since 2004, the CAE has adopted a unique, entrepreneurial and community driven-approach to supporting sustainable agriculture, reinforced by the members on the Board of Directors, and working with community leaders and supporters. The CAE will help provide funding and support for emerging farmers and food-based entrepreneurs in the Hardwick area.

Since the development of the CAE, Hardwick has grown from a run-down farm town into a booming food haven. The CAE has really advanced Hardwick for the better. Structurally, the

CAE is a non-profit with a set board of directors who all have different roles. Other than that, anyone in the community can get involved, donate, or have a say. This structure has allowed the CAE to make great strides and gain recognition for all they have done for Hardwick. They have been featured in many huge news sources, such as Gourmet Magazine, Seven Days, and the New York Times. Widely known chef Emerill Green also visited Hardwick for a segment this fall.

The CAE has also successfully taken advantage of social media. They have a full Facebook page, blog, twitter account, and fully-developed website.

“After spending a day in Hardwick, I feel a great burst of pleasure and possibility. Deep and transformative things are happening here. Hardwick has all the pieces of a healthy food system connected and ready to fall into place, and is as far ahead in sustainable agriculture as any place in the country.”

- Bill McKibben, author

The Goals of the CAE are to:

- Broadly reach out to all area residents to embrace and support the CAE’s vision, and assure this vision is owned by citizens of the greater Hardwick region.
- Convene residents of Hardwick and surrounding communities to develop the cultural and physical infrastructure needed to support the many food and agricultural ventures that are emerging in the region.
- Build relationships with the regions’ other non-profit agricultural organizations to help support increasing their efforts in the greater Hardwick area and coordinate so efforts are not duplicated and resources are maximized.
- Modeling, communicating, and sharing our progress with other communities to help support the rebuilding of healthy food systems throughout Vermont and beyond.

For the VFN:

- The direction of a non-profit has worked tremendously for the CAE. However, if this is not in the cards, think of organizing something like a board, or a more structured group of leaders with defined roles.
- Take advantage of social media; it is becoming the most effective way of reaching a broad audience. Make a Facebook page, Twitter account, or other social networking site, so that even people who may not come to every meeting can still be involved and know what is going on.
- Set defined goals. As you see here, the CAE has their distinct goals laid out. This makes it easier to accomplish things, and always have a mission to refer back to.

2.3 Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)

www.industrialareasfoundation.org

The Industrial Areas Foundation started in Chicago in the 1940s and since then has spread throughout the country and internationally. The organization's goal is to "build organizations whose primary purpose is power - the ability to act - and whose chief product is social change" (website). The IAF is non-ideological and strictly non-partisan. They build a strong membership from all different sectors of the community including "religious congregations, labor locals,

homeowner groups, recovery groups, parents associations, settlement houses, immigrant societies, schools, seminaries, orders of men and women religious, and others" (website). The IAF believes in the ability for all members of the community to participate and become leaders.

For the VFN:

I think that the structure of the IAF is not what is most interesting for the VFN, but the way in which they bring people together and organize for community change. They are masters at getting things done and they do this by involving many people throughout the community on goals that are not predetermined. IAF leaders help to organize house meetings and community gatherings that bring together community members to discuss what the real issues in the community are. Once the community members determine the projects that are most important to them (this is very important because then the community members are invested because they defined the problems), the IAF leaders empower them and help them to develop leadership skills that enable them to work towards their goals

2.4 Sustainable Ways

Wet Mountain Valley, CO

www.sustsustainableways.org

Sustainable Ways is a registered 501(c)(3) in the rural Wet Mountain Valley in southern Colorado. The Valley is about three hours from Aspen and two hours from Colorado Springs; far enough removed from the ski and tourist industry where it doesn't seem to dictate the towns' directions, but close enough to still have a connection. They are a non-profit serving the larger valley community and are "committed to making changes in our lives to improve our homes, our community, our nation, and our world through acting in sustainable ways". The community is a group of rural towns, with a strong history in ranching and agriculture; many livelihoods still depend on these industries today. Sustainable Ways' mission is "to educate advocate, and demonstrate ways of living that are consistent with the principles of sustainability and future of ourselves, our families, and our community", much like the VFN.

Sustainable Ways was formed in 2005 by a group of concerned, like-minded individuals. At first, it was structured more like a think tank; a forum for discussion, learning, and sharing of ideas. After a few years, however, they decided to incorporate and become a more formally structured organization so they could more effectively take action. As they explain, "Like all births, this one has not been without pain and effort, and the raising of the ideas in the minds of the group has required growth and definition, and it has required constant feeding and nurturing. Figuring out what "sustainable ways" and "sustainability" are has required more learning in all of our lives because these ideas are not well defined in the world we live. But we continued to have meetings and we continued to share ideas, but best of all, we continued *to act*, and *to do*."

Now, they have a Board of Directors, are a registered 501(C)(3), and are structured as a set of focus groups. Each focus group has its own mission statement and seems to act independently, with Sustainable Ways serving as an umbrella to tie everyone together provide general direction. The focus groups include Transition Initiative, Green Building, Local Foodshed, Green Cleaning, Medicinal Plants, Natural Resources, and Recycling and Renewable Energy. There is a

big focus on the Transition Initiative, including transition movie nights to help inform community members and provide a forum for discussion and action.

For the VFN:

Sustainable Ways began in much the same way as the VFN, with a similar focus and mission. After three years they found themselves at a crossroad and needed to determine how to structure themselves to be most effective. They went the formal structure route, complete with incorporating and developing a BOD. They don't seem to have any paid employees, which helps retain resources for projects. Having the larger organization serve as an umbrella under which many different focus groups operate allows for a diverse group of projects and a diverse group of people and interests to all be involved. It allows people to jump on board for issues or projects that are important to them, but doesn't make them feel tied to projects they don't care about. Whether or not their ability to take action is related to their incorporation I'm not sure, but I do think the subset of focus groups with specific mission statements would help the VFN as well.

2.5 Transition Towns

<http://www.transitiontowns.org/>

The Transition Town (TT) movement was started in 2006 by Rob Hopkins in Totnes, UK. He discovered the idea after creating an energy descent action plan for a community in Ireland that looked at energy efficiency in less conventional ways such as through food, farming, education, health and much more. The movement in the UK that he started is now connected with a non-profit in the United States that is also called Transition Towns and bases itself off the original UK organization. Transition Towns, "start off when a small collection of motivated individuals within a community come together with a shared concern: *how can our community respond to the challenges, and opportunities, of Peak Oil and Climate Change?*"

Much of the strength for TTs comes out of the feelings that people cannot achieve change alone and that the government is not a suitable partner to work with in order to make change. Community is only the real tool for change. TT members believe that we need to use creativity to work ourselves away from energy dependence and also that if we work quickly and thoroughly, there is still time to reconnect with nature. The movement tends to start with a small group of individuals but seeks to engage the whole community.

The communities go through a process that includes the following elements:

- Building awareness around peak oil and the need to reduce dependence on oil and reduce carbon emissions.
- Connecting with existing groups in the community.
- Building bridges to government.
- Connecting with other transition towns.
- Forming groups to look at key areas.
- Creating projects aimed at education around resilience and decrease of carbon.
- Eventually launching an "energy descent action plan" looking at a 15-20 year model.

Although much of the Transition Town Movement sounds like philosophy, there are rigorous steps to becoming a qualified Transition Town. According to the UK website, the reasons for this

are that they only want truly dedicated towns to embark on this process. It is long and rigorous and needs serious dedication from a town. The criteria to become a registered Transition Town are as follows:

1. An understanding of peak oil and climate change as twin drivers (to be written into **constitution or governing documents**).
2. A group of 4-5 people willing to step into **leadership roles**.
3. At least two people from the core team willing to attend an **initial two day training course**.
4. A potentially strong connection to the local council.
5. An initial understanding of the 12 steps to becoming a TT.
6. A commitment to ask for help when needed.
7. A commitment to regularly update your Transition Initiative web presence - either the wiki, or your own website.
8. A commitment to make periodic contributions to the **Transition Towns blog**.
9. A commitment, once you're into the Transition, for your group to give at least two presentations to other communities (in the vicinity) that are considering embarking on this journey – a sort of “here’s what we did” or "here's how it was for us" talk.
10. A commitment to network with other TTs.
11. A commitment to work cooperatively with neighboring TTs.
12. Minimal conflicts of interests in the core team.
13. A commitment to work with the Transition Network re grant applications for funding from national grant giving bodies. Your own local trusts are yours to deal with as appropriate.
14. A commitment to strive for inclusivity across your entire initiative. We're aware that we need to strengthen this point in response to concerns about extreme political groups becoming involved in transition initiatives.
15. A recognition that although your entire county or district may need to go through transition, the first place for you to start is in your local community. It may be that eventually the number of transitioning communities in your area warrants some central group to help provide local support, but this will emerge over time, rather than be imposed.
16. And finally, we recommend that at least one person on the core team should have attended a permaculture design course.

The organization has a board of Trustees is six-to-seven people that meet every eight weeks. Their minutes are posted on the WIKI for public viewing. The WIKI and the web seem to be a key aspect of the TT movement. The Wiki's allow people from TT's all over the world to communicate easily and share information. There are forums on specific topics that can be accessed by anyone and are constantly updated. In addition, there are links to other TT websites and book recommendations.

For the VFN:

I believe that the Transition Town Model is something that the VFN should definitely look in to

adopting. It would be an advantage for them to be part of a greater network of thoughts and ideas for new members and existing members. New members and those thinking of becoming part of the VFN could see that they were working towards becoming a TT and be able to have access to a wide range of media around TT and have many of their questions answered.

For existing members in the VFN, the criteria for becoming an official TT could give them some solid goals to work towards. The leadership roles and the workshops for a few members could provide the VFN with some direction and strategies from people who have had experience doing community work all over the world. Yet this model would not solve the problem of enticing members of the valley to attend who would not normally. The VFN would have to accept before taking the TT model on, that they may not be able to get representation from every type of person who lives in the valley. They may just need to accept that.

3. Recommendations

As a group, we have come up with a few general recommendations for the VFN, as well as two different directions that we believe the VFN could choose, accompanied by the appropriate structure recommendations.

General Recommendations

1. Decide priorities and objectives; articulate what the VFN is about to the community in order to build greater partnerships and community support.
2. Remain mindful of language and perception.
3. Determine if inclusiveness or vision is a higher priority. Dedicate to that priority.

One theme that has been recurrent at all of the VFN meetings we've attended is the issue of inclusion and VFN's desire to get people from all aspects of the community into their membership. With the VFN's current vision, we believe that it is improbable that the VFN is going to get buy-in from the whole community. The VFN's vision for a better Mad River Valley is not one that everyone shares in entirety. If the VFN wants to create an organization that everyone can come together around, it would need to start from scratch and be willing to possibly drop the whole mission in exchange for a totally different one. In our understanding, a few, passionate people created the foundation for VFN's mission (through a grant proposal to the VCF) and then community members were invited to retreats and other meetings to help fill out the goals and mission of the organization. While we believe that it is important for the VFN to be open to different community groups and ideas, the nature of the VFN's vision excludes those who do not agree that the MRV needs to be 'better' or that the VFN's tactics would result in a 'better' MRV. This issue seems to be causing stagnation in the VFN. The meetings, instead of being focused on projects or ways to work in the community, are instead focused on how to bring more people to the VFN table. Our opinion is that there are some people that do not want to come to your table. While some might never want to, there are probably other community members that will come to your table once they have a better understanding of what the VFN is about. In that case, the best way that the VFN can do is start to do actual projects within the community that will entice those community members to learn more about the VFN and possibly get involved.

If instead, the VFN decides that having representation from the community at large is the most important thing, the VFN should be ready to redefine their mission and vision into something that the whole community could get behind. Using the model of a group like the IAF, VFN could function as a community empowerment group, building local leaders that can tackle important community topics. In this case, the VFN could get involved in community events aside from the events that just represent their interests. Talking about working with the community is not as important as actually going out and getting involved with community events.

Direction & Structure Recommendations

Objective A:

Focus: Re-focus as a project oriented group to identify priorities and take action.

Structure: Create a more formal leadership and structure. This may or may not lead to incorporation as a 501 (C)(3).

Ideas for this objective:

- To become more action oriented, we believe that that the VFN would need to have a more formalized structure as well as a formal decision making process.
- Applying for funding and setting goals for project completion would be important.
- Instead of incorporating, these are other variations of formal leadership the VFN could look into.

Objective B:

Focus: Serve as a networking forum and community think tank.

Structure: Create a leadership committee to facilitate and organize events and listserv. This committee could rotate, be elected, etc.

Ideas for this objective:

- Encourage monthly meetings where different community members or organizations are highlighted. Others would come to learn what is happening in the community and how their work can be made stronger through collaboration.
- The meeting time/location might need to change to be able to include a greater number of people.
- With a less formal structure, completing projects and getting funding is hard. Therefore, the VFN could retain its' informal structure and be a designated space where ideas could be shared and partnerships could be created and nurtured. This could fill a very valuable niche in the community - helping community groups avoid redundancy and building stronger links between those organizations working on concrete projects to enhance their ability to positively impact the community.
- In this objective, it would be very important to try and bring as many people/organizations to the table as possible.
- To expand on this recommendation, we could suggest they look at the GreenDrinks model and Chamber mixers. These are informal monthly environmental networking events held all over the world. They become a great place for unlikely collaborations to begin, etc.
- The VFN could hold more structured networking events, (i.e. one specifically on green construction, one on re-skilling, etc).

References

Valley Futures Network Website: <http://www.valleyfutures.net/>

Transition Town Website: <http://www.transitiontowns.org/>

Transition Town US Website: <http://www.transitionus.org/>

Industrial Areas Foundation Website: <http://www.industrtrialareasfoundation.org/>

Sustainable Ways Website: <http://www.sustainableways.org/>

Dudley Street Network Website: <http://www.dsni.org/>

Center for an Agricultural Economy Website: <http://www.hardwickagriculture.org/>

Two books that we read that we think would be useful for the VFN to read as well:

Better Together: Restoring the American Community by Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein

Building Powerful Community Organization: A Personal Guide to Creating Groups that Can Solve Problems and Change the World by Michael Jacoby Brown. (2006)

Appendix A: Survey Analysis

1. How often do you engage in VFN activities? (15 responses)

- 2-3 times a year
- Multiple times a week. In every capacity listed in number 2.
- every few months
- a few times a year plus the listserves
- not much
- Depending on how you define VFN activities, usually several times per week, at times daily
- once in a while
- I read a tenth of the emails
- a couple times a month, selected 1, 2, and 5 for #2
- once a month - in all of these

2. In what capacity? (25 responses)

- 26% (8) Monthly breakfasts
- 17% (4) Working group meetings
- 30% (7) Retreats
- 13% (3) Events
- 13% (3) Listserve/blog

3. When/how did you become involved in the VFN? (15 responses)

- At the first retreat - a couple of years ago.
- Went to first retreat in 2007
- I took part in a retreat.
- Retreat
- I read about the VFN in the Valley Reporter in August 2008 before moving to the valley and then sought out the organizers. Robin McDermott was my first personal contact. I told Robin was considering moving to the valley. She invited me to join the VFN Master List email list in October 2008 and I attended my first VFN meeting in November 2008.
- When it initially formed.
- Was invited to attend a retreat about 2 years ago. Have participated in a few events since then though am feeling a bit over extended in the volunteer world these days.
- a retreat a year or more ago and then with the energy committee
- Through work - MRVPD.
- Should have enabled us to check more than one above. Initial retreat in 2007
- Retreat at Knoll Farm, Summer 2009
- I was invited to the first retreat and participated in it. You didn't ask why. I had just completed the MSW program at UVM and wanted to get more involved in my community since I had been so wrapped up in my studies and job. My husband was the chair of the Warren Selectboard at the time and had a particular interest in the Mad River Path and encouraged me to join. Once at the retreat, I also had an interest in transportation and saw the Path as part of this. We became the working group called "Valley Moves" and launched the Mad Bikes of Waitsfield, a community bikes program.

- Just involved in things that overlap with VFN: on board of Mad River Path Assoc.; involved in a community biomass project that interacts with energy subgroup, etc.
- When the group first started ... first retreat
- FYI- in question 2, I would have liked to have chosen more than one thing because I do participate occasionally in Fri. breakfasts, working groups, retreat, and events... I was invited to the first VFN retreat. I was honored and eager to participate in this new, emerging community happening.

4. What role do you feel the VFN fills the mad river community? (15 responses)

- Critical group of active citizens with energy, creativity, and ability to organize and act.
- major role is information sharing
- VFN in my mind does some great work to get people motivated to work together to make change people want to see. the problem I have spoken to and felt directly in the retreat is that VFN is not a sampling of all the valley's class of people. VFN talks like they represent everyone in the valley. I feel they do see only their own class of people and those who cannot take part or do not realize the benefits are left out of the process. I would like to see the members realize there is a larger body of people who matter and not just sweep the working class under the rug.
- Dialogue, bringing new voices Boards, or Board meetings. Support for volunteer efforts.
- providing a high level sustainability-focused vision for the Mad River Valley watershed as a sustainable place to live, work and play - being a networking group for those people and groups aligned with the VFN vision - a communication channel for people in the valley with sustainability-related interests - serving as an incubator/catalyst for emerging groups. - serving as a magnifier of efforts and initiatives for aligned groups
- Citizens-based sustainability movement
- It's more like a clearing house for all the existing community groups plus an avenue for all these groups to connect via the web site and listserves.
- coordinating and networking between existing valley groups
- VFN provides connection between community members, local organizations, and the community and its future.
- Not sure??
- Help prepare for the post-oil era. - Help build infrastructures (energy, transportation, agriculture, etc.) that enable individuals to make more sustainable lifestyle decisions. - Help educate community members regarding more sustainable lifestyle decisions. - Help build networks of understanding and mutual support among diverse community members. - Help expand community members' concept of community.
- Not sure. It does bring issues and people together.
- Problem solving; securing grants; collective thinking/visioning. Key: should work on bringing different people into the conversations and try to come up with solutions on how to engage "native" Valley people, who are so often seemingly "angry" or frustrated at the efforts of "new" folks...
- Not clear. Network and community involvement
- I think VFN is a wonderful sounding board/incubator for: new ideas, and also for generating ideas about how to support existing organizations, such as the Mad River Path.... sometimes the ideas become a project... After the first retreat I found myself co-chair of the transportation working group, Valley Moves. This sub group, at the time,

came up with a few projects which we got off the ground- one example is the Mad Bikes of Waitsfield, a community bike program. So Valley Moves became a thinking and doing working group... the co-chair and I eventually left Valley Moves because we were needed on the Mad Bikes committee... We need new people to step up and reactivate Valley Moves...

5. VFN modifies its agenda to address changes and meet the needs of the community (25 responses)

- 22% (5) Strongly agree
- 39% (10) Agree
- 30% (8) Neutral
- 9% (2) Disagree
- 0% (0) Strongly disagree

6. Does the VFN succeed in engaging new members? (25 responses)

- 63% (17) Yes
- 15% (4) No
- 22% (6) No answer

7a. Meetings are welcome for new members. (24 responses)

- 46% (11) Strongly agree
- 29% (7) Agree
- 21% (5) Neutral
- 4% (1) Disagree
- 0% (0) Strongly disagree

7b. If yes, how? (11 responses)

- I believe that anyone is welcome to join the group.
- Generally VFN does ok in this area - through dependable monthly meetings, retreats, and an active listserv. Membership could continue to grow.
- partly, but could be stronger
- Yes, but it does feel like we are preaching to the choir. How can we get a broader representation of community members?
- The retreats do reach out to new members
- It continues to attract first time attendees to the monthly meetings, but there is no active outreach to attract ever larger numbers of people to participate in the VFN. Partly due to the fact that the VFN has no communication strategy, or for that matter any strategy at all. It has a vision statement, a web presence, email lists, a blog, retreats, and some other things, but there is no clear or transparent governance or leadership of the VFN.
- ? I think so
- The VFN group disregards the working class a group of people who are not interested in change.
- maybe, new membership has been very slow in coming. plus "old" membership drop out
- A qualified 'yes' - recruitment usually takes place around specific events and focused initiatives.

8. Meetings are well-publicized. (25 responses)

- 4% (1) Strongly agree
- 60% (15) Agree
- 24% (6) Neutral
- 12% (3) Disagree
- 0% (0) Strongly disagree

9. I am comfortable sharing new ideas with the VFN, either in meetings or in other settings (24 responses)

- 42% (10) Strongly agree
- 46% (11) Agree
- 4% (1) Neutral
- 8% (2) Disagree
- 0% (0) Strongly disagree

10. The VFN values my contributions. (23 responses)

- 43% (10) Strongly agree
- 35% (8) Agree
- 9% (2) Neutral
- 13% (3) Disagree
- 0% (0) Strongly disagree

11a. Does the VFN retain individual members? (27 responses)

- 44% (12) Yes
- 23% (6) No
- 33% (9) No answer

11b. Please explain. (10 responses)

- Haven't been involved long enough to have an opinion about some of your questions.
- Many people have gone to the retreats who have since dropped off the radar.
- Generally it does. It is lacking in building upon the energy of the retreats and events.
- could be stronger
- Yes, though the additional meetings can be time consuming for those already involved in other volunteer capacities.
- I am not sure; it does welcome those who have time to get involved in the way the individuals wishes to get involved.
- Yes, I would say there are individual members of the VFN, but membership is not a clear thing. No one says "You are a member." Nor is there any artifact to show that you are a member. There are no dues, or sign-up beyond the email lists.
- ?
- I am not sure of this.
- More alumni of the retreats are doing nothing than are the alumni who are doing something and staying involved.

12. Conflicts within the group are resolved effectively. (22 responses)

- 5% (1) Strongly agree

- 45% (10) Agree
- 45% (10) Neutral
- 5% (1) Disagree
- 0% (0) Strongly disagree

13. I am happy with the VFN's currently information organizational structure. (24 responses)

- 13% (3) Strongly agree
- 46% (11) Agree
- 25% (6) Neutral
- 8% (2) Disagree
- 8% (2) Strongly disagree

14a. What is the greatest benefit to having an informal organizational structure? (13 responses)

- Allows participation in projects with all effort invested in the projects, not in administrative elections, officers, etc.
- this eliminates all the extraneous structure that would add nothing
- Spread Information and support for volunteer projects as they come up and as someone spearheads a project
 - Anyone can start leading something - Formation of new groups happens easily - There is no threat or fear of leadership power
- networking
- It is very flexible and can change and respond as needed to the community needs.
- networking and coordination of activities and ideas
- Sharing the work load, flexibility, etc.
- If I disagree with the statement above then I probably don't see a benefit.
- Activities can ebb and flow according to members' interests. A lot of room and support for individual creativity and initiatives.
- It is flexible and you can be as involved as you want to be without feeling terribly guilty. As Path activities have taken up more time, there are only so many meetings that I attend. This does not seem to be a problem, except for me, because I wish I could attend more VFN events be more involved.
- It is not intimidating and feels easy to access.
- Why would you have a formal organization structure if you don't actually have a formalized mission and objective?
- Flexibility, able to be responsive and adapt as necessary... One can drop in and drop out of VFN, as desired... You don't have to be in a working group to participate in the monthly breakfasts...

14b. What is the greatest challenge? (12 responses)

- Communication and no duplicating work others might be doing
- Lack of strategy - Lack of coordinated communication - Confusion about the community as to the VFN's purpose - Confusion with the VFN as to the VFN's purpose - Lack of progress - No fund raising -
- Clarity of purpose/mission.
- keeping momentum going

- Lack of consistency, takes a long time to initiate change, lack of decision making body, inability to receive funds (ala non-profit) etc.
- Lack of constancy of purpose.
- Decision-making is not transparent to me. I would guess that some decisions simply aren't made due to lack of clarity about who should be making them. There seems to be some hesitancy about representing the VFN to the "outside world." I wonder whether this is because individual members feel they do not have the authority to speak for the whole group?
- Identifying a purpose, I see that VFN is kind of amorphous and eclectic and not sure that it really brings the diverse members of the community and I am fearful that it is just becoming another organization rather than building a stronger community or being a catalyst.
- Not sure
- Figuring out what the group really should be doing.
- Many folks just don't understand what VFN really is all about? Maybe we have a "branding" issue? I think there still exists confusion amongst VFN members, and the greater community about our purpose and identity? Are we a thinking or doing organization, or both... Would VFN exist without Rob William's involvement? Some folks still consider VFN an elitist group, no matter how hard we have tried to get the word out there that in fact VFN is an inclusive, absolutely inclusive organization! Avoiding redundancy- and instead figuring out how to effectively support existing working groups, i.e. Friends of Mad River, the Path, Carbon Shredders...
- Reaching a tipping point as far as momentum with active "members", activities and projects. There are many issues that effect us all but are not dealt with on a valley wide basis, rather on town by town basis.

15. Are there any changes you'd like to see to the VFNs organizational structure? (18 responses)

- Not at the present time.
- not sure yet
- Create an executive committee of four.
- I am on the fence right now about remaining informal, versus building some more formal structures.
- I'm not sure, it may have gone beyond being a viable organization. In its existence I'm not sure I can point to one significant accomplishment.
- It depends upon the objective and role in community planning.
- A master list of who is involved and what their groups and projects are. A contact person to go to with ?s and learn how to be more involved.
- Good question- I think once we are really clear about who we are- what our purpose is- the ideal organizational structure will become more obvious.
- What is the organizational structure?
- not sure
- I think possibly dissolve... Well something like the Transition Town idea that it doesn't become stagnant, but kind of becomes its working groups...and the central structure kind of disappears. But then again, managing a community bulletin board is critical.

- I'm too new to the network to make sweeping recommendations. As a newcomer I'd like to see greater transparency in who the members are and what their interests are. For example, I really like the way the Transition Vermont website handles this.
- I think that there needs to be some leadership to the organization as well as a focus on the mission. I realize that is asking a lot since no one has stepped up and offered to take on that leadership responsibility. Vision, mission, strategy and programs.
- The creation of a decision making body could assist in making decisions quicker.
- integrate transition town ideas
- Yes!!!! Must Have: - A formal leadership group with specific areas of responsibility or representation. There are a variety of ways this leadership group could be formed (volunteers, recruiting, representatives from groups which identify with VFN, etc.) Possibly have: - Becoming a 501(c)(3) - Board of Directors - Paid executive director position
- no,
- not sure

16. What are new opportunities for growth within the VFN? (15 responses)

- yes - creative ideas and solutions always allow opportunities for growth.
- just adding more active participants (somehow)
- I think the VFN could leverage what it has proven to do well which is to serve as a networking group for those individuals and groups which identify with the VFN mission. Specific work should be left to groups focused on those areas, and if there is no such group, to facilitate the creation of such a group, but in the end, new groups need to be self motivated. Something struck me when I re-read the notes from the Dec 2008 retreat was a comment which questioned if the VFN was just another organization with an appetite for funding. As such, the VFN then becomes was a competitor for money with the organization with which it hopes to work and whose collaboration and support is critical. Instead, I wonder if the VFN could become a valuable service provider to these various groups, doing grant writing, facilitated sessions, etc.
- It has grown so quickly in its first few years. It seems VFN should strengthen what it has achieved so far before trying to add additional projects. Growth in people is good though. Bring as many into the fold as possible.
- not sure
- Not sure.
- More deliberate efforts to build "social capital" within the MRV community and create opportunities for folks from differing perspectives to simply listen to each other and find areas of commonality. -- I would like to see the website and listserve be more of a community resource. I like the approach of Transition Vermont. -- There's a significant amount of expertise on various topics within the VFN group. How 'bout having a monthly (or more frequent) VFN corner in the Valley Reporter for articles on the amazing work and learning that is being done by members of our group? -- Publicize meetings to the general public. Have periodic orientations (2x yearly?) to the VFN /updates from each committee so newbies can get a better feel for what it's all about. Include this info on the website.
- More internet activity. Funding and technical source for to grow.
- not sure

- Not clear.
- New and renewed energy, participation, members in the working groups. Additional working groups...
- I'd like to think that the VFN can serve as an alternate (governing) body for the whole Valley. I don't see our town governments joining together as one, any time soon, even though there could likely be opportunities for savings based on economy of scale. A single governing body for approximately 6,000 residents could hardly be considered "big government", but working as a single unit could probably accomplish much more. Anyone interested in running for "Mayor"?!
- Get the schools involved to change their heating systems and hot water and electrical sources.
- Depends upon objectives.
- Certainly, we have much more opportunities for individuals and leadership.

17a. Has the VFN overcome any obstacles? (27 responses)

- 37% (10) Yes
- 19% (5) No
- 44% (12) No answer

17b. if so what were they and what methods were used? (10 responses)

- I don't know.
- Just getting started and launching is pretty huge.
- Yes, I think the fact that VFN still exists is impressive... especially given our informal organization!
- Don't really know. Hard to tell what obstacles the group is trying to overcome and depends on what it's objectives are
- I am sure, but I am not that plugged in, so don't really know!
- Some people viewed it as exclusive because they didn't get "invited." We have tried to expand this by having people invite neighbors and friends. I still would like to see more of a public nature to retreats. Kind of like what was done in Martha's Vineyard with the Island Plan.
- Bike project overcame the issue of insurance. I am not aware of obstacles the organization has faced??
- Facilitated retreats have built community and relationships where there weren't any.
- Broader community representation is needed.
- I am not sure how to answer this (yes or no). There are certainly some obstacles which the VFN has overcome, such as coming into existence in the first place, the formation of the groups, keeping the momentum going on monthly meetings, etc. Where I think VFN has not overcome obstacles is in the area of organizational structure. The first organizing principal which I saw fall apart was the steering committee set-up of having representatives of the many valley groups get together to report on what was happening. That fell apart in fall of 2008. The Dec 2008 meeting recommended that the VFN become a part of the MRPD. When that was turned down, the VFN had no group to figure out a Plan B, so I would say the VFN has not yet overcome that obstacle.

18a. What factors, if any, make it difficult for the VFN to work effectively within the community? (15 responses)

- VFN still has a generational weak link to older folks in community. Also, still has a sort of 'fraternity' label attached to it.
- lack of recognition/awareness, apathy, lack of time
- Many people wonder, "Who are they, what is this group? How are they different from Town Boards, or specific volunteer groups?"
- Having a monthly meeting which not all can attend - Being invitation-only or perceived invitation-only for some its events - Not having people specifically tasked with community outreach
- perceptions of elitism and energy in general
- Underlying schism between "newcomers" and "locals."
- Time available is a big problem. Others in town - specifically the true locals, farmers, etc no wanting to be a part of the group - they are happy being loners and I respect them for that.
- Perception (and sometimes reality) of elitism.
- Not sure that people, particularly long term local residents see that it can possibly help them.
- LOTS going on! Most of us are very busy and therefore don't have a lot of extra time to devote to this "general" effort, especially if we are committed to more specific volunteer activities (schools, recreation, energy, food, etc.).
- Seems to be pretty much a closed shop of locals. Not particularly welcoming of second home owners in the valley. Very focused on the sustainability agenda, which is fine, but not clear it's really adding that much value.
- See above...
- I think that many folks struggle just to make ends meet and make it thru another month of bills. Improving our community, connecting our towns via a path, reducing our waste and our pollution are goals that most agree with, but sadly have little time, money or energy to make a priority (yet). Please see above comments regarding the 4 towns.
- Everyone that is involved is in many instances involved in many other initiatives as well so time available to devote to projects may be a difficulty.
- Vision is broad, so not specific enough to be actionable. 2. Broad vision likely makes it difficult to attract broad representation from community. There's nothing to disagree about... 3. Formal connection to MRV planning district is not clear.

18b. If there were, how can these be turned in to an opportunity? (8 responses)

- yes, but there needs to be real projects that capture a broad spectrum of community participation.
- not clear
- Identifying shared interests and opportunities. e.g. appropriate workshops, re-skilling, etc.
- See above.
- Find out what people want across a broader section of the community. Work with local select boards and planning boards and join in their surveys and planning as well as to find out what are hot issues and see how the VFN can be effective with outreach.
- VFN is working with this by making efforts going into specific activities be part of VHN efforts, i.e. wrapping in to it initiatives that are already underway.

- If folks see positive results from their efforts time and energy, they will stay involved and attract others to become involved. Success begets more success!
- Move from vision to a specific strategy/plan. 2. Move toward a more defined vision, strategy and implementation plan. More community members may want to become involved as the vision becomes more specific. 3. Formalize and publicize VFN role and relationship to MRVPD.

19a. Are there any local groups, orgs, etc. that occupy the same niche as the VFN? What are they doing that VFN is not? (27 responses)

- 19% (5) Yes
- 26% (7) No
- 56% (15) No answer

19b. What are they doing that VFN does not? (9 responses)

- The MRVPD, MRPA, MRVCC, Carbon Shredders, FOMR, MRWCP (Vermont Land Trust), CVCLT, CVRPD, the Catamount Trail, town Conservation Committees, Planning Commissions & Selectman and many other individuals and private companies occupy portions of the same niche. However, only MRVPD approaches the broad reach of goals and geography of VFN.
- Don't know
- They kind of work in tandem and we scratch each other's backs. So groups like Friends of the Mad River, the MRV Path, the Carbon Shredders, GM Global Forum... The Inter-Religious group... Evergreen (a senior meals site), Roots Work: They are provide a service or program in the community, The Rotary, The select boards and planning commission as well as the Rec Committee.
- Not sure?? I think that Vital Communities in the Upper Valley is a good model of some of what VFN is trying to achieve.
- There are so many groups operating in the valley there has got to be overlap. Do we have a good inventory of all the groups and their purposes? If not, this could be a starting point. Big task though...
- Again, yes and no. The VFN's vision overlaps with many other groups in the valley, but I do not know of any other group where there is a direct overlap/competitor. The other groups are generally focused on more specific goals. In many cases these other groups are 501(c)(3), have executive directors, do fund raising, have active campaigns, etc.
- Probably
- groups that focus on one specific area (like one of the VFN work groups) - like Mad River Path
- There is a wide spectrum of volunteer groups - MR Path, Friends of Mad River, Interfaith Council of Churches, Community Service Team, etc, that overlap the VFN.

20a. Are there groups that the VFN is not working with? (27 responses)

- 40% (10) Yes
- 8% (2) No
- 52% (15) No answer

20b. If yes, who? (10 responses)

- Local, old-time groups of friends and neighbors (the "natives") - not sure how you gain access to these: fire departments? masons? churches? On the other hand, maybe they don't want to participate...?
- Probably, Service club/groups like the Masons, Odd Fellows, I am not sure. I get the feeling that we are a very similar group of largely college educated Yuppie types.
- I suggested working with local churches as a way of reaching out to a wider segment of the community. There was apparently some resistance to this idea within the VFN group, which I think is unfortunate. If we want folks to pay attention to us and be open to what we have to offer, we also need to be willing to "go where the people are" and listen to/acknowledge what they have to offer us.
- Probably but do they want to be working with us? ie. The Business Builders group. Leo Cohen's 20 by 20 group.
- Rootswork, Mad River Solid Waste Resource Management Alliance, Mountain Gardeners, Mad Birders, Food Shelf, Green Mtn. Global Forum, Vermont Earth Institute, Rural Resource Commission, Green Mtn Cultural Center, Historical Societies, MRV Community Fund, MRV Senior Citizens, Valley Players, WMRW, and Mad River Riders.
- see answer above.
- Many, many groups, some of which may not make sense. Some of the groups which might make sense: Rotary, Churches, School PTAs, Businesses? Valley Players, Mad River Chorale, Farmer's Market, Yestermorrow, Green Mountain Cultural Center, Green Mountain Valley School, Mad River Chorale, etc.
- farmers mechanics labor class of people
- not sure
- not sure - VFN provides leadership and ideas to a whole lot of other groups - it is the 'think tank' engine.

21. What projects would you like to see the VFN addressing?

- Long term energy plan for MRV, form an energy assessment district, promote sustainable agricultural initiatives, promote and help build pedestrian infrastructure throughout MRV.
- several items in the vision are not being worked on "supporting a strong, resilient business community" is an example
- affordable housing in the valley
- First and foremost getting itself organized with a structure which will be sustainable for the long haul. Once that is done, there are many, many projects and initiatives which the VFN could help foster and facilitate many of which the VFN knows. One set of projects which would be a key ingredient/lens to consider for future projects and initiatives is whether they produce something tangible for the community as in paying jobs, food, etc.
- Environment; seems to be a missing component; perhaps it could work collaboratively with the Friends of the Mad River and town conservation commissions.
- I'd like to see VFN work more with the chamber and issues of economy/local currency.
- See #16 above. I'm interested in agenda-less community potlucks as one way of building community. Everyone is interested in food! :)

- Transportation Homelessness Health Care Disability awareness Elderly Homebound You can see that I am a social worker.
- local jobs, stuff for teens; is there a way to revive/overlap with the Open Hearth Community Center?
- Economic development and political reform in the valley.
- Completing the Mad River Path from Moretown to Warren consistently ranks as the #1 project and for all the right reasons!
- Energy independence Energy reduction in the valley Schools energy consumption and sources
- Affordable housing Logical planning on a Valley wide basis rather town by town. Interacting with state agencies and organizations that are working on similar projects - THE Valley is not an independent state.
- A comprehensive energy and food/agriculture plan for Mad River Valley.
- The culture of arrogance that exists in some government officials.

22. Anything else you'd like the VFN to know.

- More action/participation in actual projects - less talking chatting, tweeting, sitting around!
- while VFN fosters communication and provides a forum for working groups, it seems that many, if not all, of these working groups would have started without VFN anyways
- It is my very strong desire to see the VFN succeed and I think it is essential that once the UVM structure group has delivered its findings and recommendations that a self selected group of people diligently work on putting a stake in the ground as to how the VFN is to be organized with a clearly identified leadership team. I fear that if this cannot be accomplished that over time the VFN will dissolve. I would be happy to be a part of such an effort and I think the formation of this group should immediately follow the end of the UVM class, that is in December, with a goal of having the first meeting of such a group in January 2010 and having a recommendation to the VFN community by the March 2010.
- The Friday breakfast meetings seem to be only for those that are "chairs" of various committees. Perhaps that approach makes the meetings efficient; however, it does seem to discourage others from participating.
- rock on!
- Suggestion for further research and discussion: What are the incentives for community members to participate in the Valley Futures Network?
- I think that this is a terrific initiative; I just think that we might need a focus. I am not sure how to find time for it all. Would like to shift my focus, but I am now on the board of two organizations... Am doing good things and they take a lot of time.
- Sorry I ran out of time... but I do want to say, that I'm thrilled the UVM team of students is helping VFN do this self-analysis. We are all grateful and eager to hear what the students' findings/suggestions will be!
- As with most projects, many hands makes for light work. Informing folks as to what little things they can do to get involved or help a project would make for fertile ground to attract newcomers and spur folks to action. Many times there are "hidden costs" to doing nothing, that once identified, make a compelling case for taking action
- Keep up the great work.

- Your survey didn't allow for 'not sure/don't know' as a response. In some of your questions, neutral reflects this. There's an impression in the community (not necessarily mine) that VFN doesn't tolerate opinions that are different from a core group.
- As you see, I'm rather critical but I seriously believe we have let a great opportunity get away from us by not be inclusive but just talking to the same people who are dreaming of how life can be better and good for them. The problem is that that does not move the ball down the field. This originally was created because we knew that only the activist, not meant negatively, were involved and we wanted to reach out to a broad representative mix of Valleyites who had things to contribute. VFN as it exists now would be threatening, intimidating or politically objectionable to many of those that we originally wanted to attract.
- I think VFN has tremendous potential; I think we are still feeling our way, though. I am grateful for the help of UVM students in assisting us thinking this through.
- Don't go away. The community needs leadership outside of the traditional governmental positions. Inspire community spirit and dedication to making the Mad River Valley a great place to live, work and recreate.

23. Town of Residence, years lived there, age, and representation

Age	Town of Residence	Years of Residence in the Mad River Valley	Representing yourself, your family, and/or an organization
72	Waitsfield	42	myself
62	Waitsfield	9	myself
45	Waitsfield	2	
56	Warren	30	
43	Waitsfield	less than 1	self
	Waitsfield	15 yrs	family
46	Warren	12 (plus 5 yrs in the 80s)	all of the above
61	Warren	38	myself
32	Waitsfield	1+	Yes to all
51	Waitsfield	5	Myself
52	Waitsfield	11	myself
58	Warren	35	self
45	Warren	16	myself
52	Waitsfield	15	Self
60	Waitsfield	32	Yes!