

# Summary of MRV Vision Initiatives

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Over the past three plus decades the Mad River Valley Planning District has involved the public in a process of assessing the community by identifying key issues, values, and trends. *Mad River Valley Perspectives* was the first series of talks in 1980 that led to a clear vision of what the community valued most- protection of rural character. In 1990 the *Valley Forum Series* covered many topics including the future of the ski industry, settlement patterns, the health of the Mad River, impacts of incremental growth, problems associated with a tourist based economy, and the need for affordable housing. Thirteen years later *Vision 2020* fostered a community conversation regarding the future of the Valley. Participants indicated great interest in growth, development, economic and conservation issues. The most recent effort, 2015's *MRV Vision & Vitality Workshop Series*, undertook a community engagement process to develop a community-held vision and a deeper understanding of business needs. The effort enhanced economic sector identity, identified asset areas, as well as existing barriers to economic vitality.

These four efforts have developed information that has proven instrumental in guiding the Mad River Valley's planning endeavors. They illustrate a strong commitment to the look, feel and operation of the Mad River Valley, a dedication to public process, and an evolution of identify. Below is a summary of these public processes.

## MRV Perspectives

- Date: January – June, 1980
- Participants: 289 (conference total 800)

This three part series was part of the 1980 MRV Growth Impact Study and was supported by the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission, Vermont Council of Humanities and the Farmer's Home Administration.

The focus was on the land, economy and people. There were 14 presentations and public discussions within those topic areas. 289 different people repeatedly attended the series, for a total of 800 meeting seats filled. The series was intended to create dialogue on and learn attitudes about population growth, increase in traffic and changes in land use.

Topics of discussion: Images of Vermont, Route 100, attitudes towards the land, preserving open land, perceptions of landscape, small business in the Valley, recreational industry in the Valley, Farming in the Valley, Women in the Valley, MRV name change, intra municipal cooperation, the Valley's housing situation, and finding and preserving a comfortable way of life. (The last was a topic, but there is no information available on that forum)

## Land

- People in the Valley appreciate the agrarian landscape and rural feel; there is a strong commitment to keeping it that way. Landscape is to be protected with land use polices and zoning. Participants wanted to ensure local control.
- Perception of the landscape- “we don’t share a common vision of how things should be, but we do share a vision for how things shouldn’t be.”
- Route 100 is perceived as an asset to protect.

## Economy

- Tourism is a necessary distraction. Tourism needs to grow in order to help the small businesses that survive on it, but there is no tolerance for that growth.
- Diversification in business type and season is suggested.
- Businesses seek more customers, but not so many that it impacts their quality of life.
- Threats to business are weather, national trends that effect visitors discretionary spending, unpredictable future growth.
- Farming is negatively impacted by taxes, regulations, & runoff from development. When discussing local products, large dairy points out that they operate at large scale and local purchases are not relevant. 11 out of 18 farmers were present!
- Diversification- small light industrial and year round business

## People

- Group votes indicated favor for intra-municipal cooperation in the case of shared emergency services, planning commission and MRV Planner. It is not favorable for sharing a town manager, or selectboard, as that would threaten the autonomy of each town.
- A shortage of housing was not perceived as a problem. The attendees were all homeowners.
- The author of the summary document assessed that the attendees understood that lack of affordable housing led to lack of employees, which worked to accomplish the goal of controlling growth.

## Outcomes

- Mad River Valley Planning District

## Valley Forum Series

- Date: September, 1990 – January, 1991
- Participants: ?

A six part series designed to “provide residents an opportunity to discuss issues of concern, to evaluate existing policy, and to examine current local sentiment on issues” (Introduction to the Valley Forum series of 1990, author unknown). Topics were growth, cost of growth, the Mad River, housing and Rural Resource Protection.

### Patterns of Growth in the MRV

- This discussion was deemed necessary because of high rates of growth in the MRV during the 80’s. The growth exceeded the rate in Washington County and in the state during that same time period. Land was being subdivided and single-family homes were being built. There was fear that the remarkable countryside scenery could morph into a suburban appearance. This series educated citizens and policy makers on historical growth management tools and discussed how they may be improved.
- Randall Arendt, from the Center of Rural Massachusetts, spoke at the forum on innovative development techniques that respected traditional New England towns and did not follow conventional zoning rules. He warned against following standard zoning rules that are often applied to high-density suburban areas and pointed out that the MRV did not have high-density standards. He suggested that there be a written description on what attracts people here and that future plans could be created from that document.
- The Valley Reporter covered this forum (9/13/90). Planning officials were interviewed and most did not feel like the high-density issue that was brought up was an MRV issue. It was pointed out that infrastructure does not exist to accommodate high-density development. Also mentioned was that this portion of the series did not allow for discussion and feedback from the community.
- Jeff Squires, MRV Planning District’s original director, outlined the factors that influenced the current planning framework: The residents and leaders have been creative, engaged, open-minded and eager to forge partnerships. The Valley is both a natural and economic community. Strong partnerships with Sugarbush and Vermont Land Trust have assisted in framing the planning discussion.

### Economic Growth in MRV: Boom Bust Boom

- This discussion is about the Valley’s economic future. Poor weather has exposed the fragility of the MRV tourist based economy.

- Professor St. John of Long Island University spoke to the community on the dangers of becoming Manchester, VT. St John believed that Manchester sold out to development over planning and big box over Mom and Pop. Before the growth, the special character of the quaint New England town had attracted visitors. The community has a sense of hostility about the changes and St John believes that it is taken out on the tourist. He concludes that Manchester is suffering because of prioritizing a quick dollar over service to customers. He warns MRV to be wary of counting visitors and not spenders, not to expect outside help and take to care of its customers.
- The discussion that came after the presentation from St. John was about developing a plan to attract both high and middle income tourists, there was concern if the valley could have a healthy economy attracting high and middle income tourists without growth, and conservation to attract visitors to the economic asset was discussed. Susan Easley, from the MRV Chamber of Commerce, discussed efforts to recruit new business to the Valley and plans for training current businesses on customer service and marketing.

### The Cost of Growth

- This discussion was necessary because vacation home values were stagnant and year round population of school aged children increased, leading to stagnant revenues and more expenditures.
- Deborah Brighton, of Ad hoc Advocates, explained that Valley residents are “rich” from the perspective of the tax rate. She found that the MRV was better off than most Vermont towns, but that was changing due to the increase of people here using services (schools, roads) and the cost that accompany use. Conservation can be more cost effective than development.
- The conversations that followed questioned if strategizing on the tax rate should guide planning and development priorities. Brighton suggests that the goal is to have a good community that can be paid for and while planning decisions should not be based on the tax base, the tax burden to the residents should always be considered.

### The Future of the Mad River

- This discussion was born out of sensitivity to community concern over Sugarbush’s plan for its snowmaking pond.
- Jack Byrne, of River Watch Network, summarized water quality studies performed between 1985 and 1990. All three studies show an impact on the lower reaches of the Mad River. Erosion and sedimentation, trash and the presence of fecal coliform were significant. Streambed sedimentation, erosion countermeasures, people being irresponsible with trash, failed septic and run off from barnyards and streets were the culprits.

- Kinny Connell, of Friends of the Mad River, spoke about formalizing their organization as well as obtaining a Wild and Scenic designation from the National Park Service. This designation would require creating a protection plan for the river.

### Housing in the Mad River Valley

- In 1988 a developer proposed to develop a large number of affordable housing units near Lincoln Gap Road. Nearly 100 people turned out to be part of this discussion. The MRV housing coalition was born from this and this forum provides research and options for affordable housing in the MRV.
- Doug Kennedy, of DJK Associates, conducted a needs assessment. He discovered that while income in the Valley grew slower than housing cost, low and moderately income elderly and 20-35 year olds are most in need of affordable housing. According to people interviewed by the Valley Reporter, there were concerns about his data and methodology. Kennedy was encouraged to interview more residents.
- Beth Humstone, of Humstone Squires Associates, suggested that the towns determine their priorities and then look to public funds, infill housing, conversion of large homes, shared housing, conversion of hotels, land conservation and public-private partnerships.
- Residents questioned why raising wages wasn't part of the conversation.

### Rural Resource Protection in the Mad River Valley

- This forum was a response to development trends in the 80's. Residents were fearful of losing the Valley's rural character. The MRV Planning District with the Vermont Land Trust initiated the Rural Resource Protection Program to guide policy.
- Virginia Farley of the Vermont Land Trust presented the Rural Resource Protection Plan. The plan created a framework for creating the Mad River Path, establishing the Conservation Development Fund and historic preservation program. The character of the Valley was defined and key properties that support that character were identified for preservation.

### Outcomes

- Friends of the Mad River Valley
- MRV Housing Coalition
- Economic Development Group

## Valley Vision 2020

- Date: November 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup>, 2004
- Participation: 195

The Mad River Planning District and a steering committee of Valley residents organized this public gathering that was moderated by a professional facilitator. On November 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup>, 195 Valley residents turned out to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their community and to create a shared vision for the future. The day and a half conversation covered: Leadership and Informed Citizenry, Vibrant Arts, Education, Infrastructure, Social Services, Natural Resources and Environment, Economy, Planning and Development, Community Connectedness, Housing, Health and Wellness, Balanced Growth and Sustainability, Recreation and Arts Opportunities and Regional Cooperation.

The group prioritized the need for a Valley-Wide master plan, Mad Path completion, creation of a multi-purpose community space, creation of a community calendar and support for local agriculture in schools and stores.

There was no agricultural representation.

### Outcomes

- Valley Futures Network - This community-driven network existed between 2007 and 2013. The focus was to implement Valley Vision 2020 and build leadership. VFN strove to create connections with neighbors by creating dialogue and collaboration on building a sustainable community where citizens coexist with nature. Networks of initiatives were fashioned to support a healthy, vibrant and whole community within the MRV watershed. The initiatives spanned agriculture, energy, local currency, a land bank, recycling, habitat, and transportation. Next steps for this organization were focused on creating a stronger network of collaborators.
  - VFN created Valley Vision statement: “The future vision is pedestrian accessible, energy efficient, environmentally friendly community with a trail system, strong local government, no traffic lights, that has a clean river, great schools, and fewer cars on the road. It is also business friendly with great cell service and up to date technology.”
- MRV Localvores
- MRV Chamber Community Calendar

## Vision & Vitality Series

- Date: Summer-Winter 2015
- Participation: 150+ Workshop Attendees; 250+ Summit Attendees

Following a 2014 MRV Economic Study, representatives from MRVPD, MRV Chamber of Commerce, and six members at large formed the MRV Vision & Vitality Steering Committee to begin a community engagement process to develop a community-held vision and a deeper understanding of business needs. Through the summer and fall of 2015, the MRVPD, MRVCC and a local volunteer business consultant led the Economic Vitality Series (EVS), 10-workshops designed to create a discussion with the business community around the issues and opportunities that arise while doing business in the MRV. In what was termed a “tsunami” of interest and input from over 150 workshop attendees as well as survey respondents from the broader community, several themes emerged, which the steering committee organized into asset and issue areas. These were further refined at a culminating workshop of sector representatives. Four asset areas, Recreation, Creative Economy, Wellness, and Food System, as well as the top priority issues, marketing, economic development and business support, were identified to inform the work plan of the Chamber of Commerce. In addition, the workshops identified three barriers to economic vitality: housing affordability, transportation challenges, and community identity. The MRVPD addressed these barriers as part of its work plan.

Following these workshops, the process and the areas of focus were shared with the larger community at a second Economic Summit, held on December 19th with over 250 attendees. The summit included the unveiling of a MRV Vision Statement and presentation by community members and business owners who had formed well-organized alliances: Wellness Alliance, MRV Food Network, Creative Economy, and Recreation as a result of participating in the workshops.

### Outcomes

- 2015 MRV Vision Statement
- Alignment of MRVPD work with MRV Vision, including greater focus on affordable housing, transportation and placemaking
  - MRV Housing Study, 2016
  - Revitalization of MRV Housing Coalition
  - Revitalization of MRV Transportation Advisory Committee
  - MRV Moves Active Transportation Plan
  - MRV Unified Trailhead Kiosk & Mapping Project
- MRV LOT Committee