

Hartford Planning Commission/Town Plan Economic Development Steering Committee Meeting
Town Plan Economic Development Chapter Update
Approved Minutes
May 29, 2024

Planning Commission vice-chair Bruce Riddle called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. He followed by reading the hybrid meeting script and conducting a roll call.

Attendance: The following individuals attended the meeting which was held at the Hartford Town Hall in Room 312 at 171 Bridge Street in White River Junction on Wednesday, May 29, 2024. The meeting was also available remotely and several people joined that way. Planner Matt Osborn announced that since several Steering Committee members were unable to attend tonight's meeting, the meeting will be recorded. There were no objections.

Planning Commission & Town Plan Steering Committee Members:

Bruce Riddle	John	Planning Commission, term expires 2/7/25	Planning
Heath		Commission, term expires 3/11/24	
Toby Dayman		Planning Commission, term expires 6/28/24	
Havah Walter	Kim	Hartford Area Chamber of Commerce	
Souza		Selectboard Liaison to the Planning Commission	
Jesse Pollard		Energy Commission	
Meghan Asbury		Two Rivers-Ottawquechee Regional Commission	

Staff:

Lori Hirshfield	Director, Department of Planning and Development
Matt Osborn	Town Planner, Department of Planning and Development

Consultants:

Jason Godfrey	Better City
Serra Güllü	Better City

Others Present:

David Briggs
Peggy Adams

Public Comments: Bruce asked if there are any public comments. There were none.

Jason Godfrey started by noting that we are now moving from broad topics to specifics. He stated that we will discuss Part I of the potential strategies. Jason noted the context for potential strategies:

- Authenticity: Does it fit with who we are?
- Are there resources available to do?
- Who is going to do it?

Jason stated that Better City received a great deal of input from the March focus groups, interviews and community forum in addition to the surveys.

Jason noted that diversity and inclusion are important qualities to Generation Z. He believes Hartford has taken many actions to be an inclusive community. Bruce added that the Town still needs to work harder at it. Others agreed.

Serra Güllü identified the first four major strategy categories:

1. Identity Positioning
2. Creative Economy
3. Innovative Economy
4. Nature Economy

Serra noted that each topic has a goal, objectives, strategic actions and key metrics.

1. Identity Positioning:

- Helps the community understand and agree on economic goals.
- Provide competitive advantage, sets Hartford apart from neighboring towns and cities.
- Fosters a sense of pride and ownership among residents.
- Directs efforts and resources towards specific economic outcomes.

Goal: Establish and communicate a clear, compelling identity for Hartford that unifies the community and guides economic development decisions.

Strategic Actions:

1. Create an identity positioning statement.
2. Formulate a communication plan.
3. Policy Alignment.

Kim Souza asked if the identity would be townwide. Jason responded yes. Toby Dayman asked if the identity would be different from other area communities. Jason responded yes. Havah asked who will take the lead on the identity and how is it funded? Lori responded that there will be a new position in the Planning and Development Department that will focus on housing and economic development working with the Chamber and other community members. She suggested that the Town consider forming an economic development committee to be a part of the process. Jason stated that identity positioning isn't a one-time effort. It is reflected in policy decisions and communication. David suggested working closely with the Green Mountain Economic Development Corporation. Lori stated that would be part of the process

- 2. Creative Economy:** Jason noted that community input and data gathered indicate this is an important part of who Hartford is and the impact on the economy. He noted there are six established Vermont creative zones, of which Windsor County and Orange County are combined into one. He presented the following statewide statistics:

- 9.3% employment in creative firms.
- 3.2% of Vermont's GDP.
- 85% of Vermonter's say art is an important part of community. □ \$79 million in creative economy employment earnings.

Goal: Strengthen the Town's creative economy, enhancing the quality of life and fostering a distinct community identity.

Strategic Actions:

1. Create a Creative Economy Steering Committee
2. Inventory & Mapping of Hartford's Creative Assets.
3. Education & Training in the Creative Sector.
4. Sustain & Develop Creative Spaces.

Bruce noted a recent creative economy report prepared by the Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission. He stated that it is hard to make a living in the creative economy and be sustainable.

Kim noted the success of the Downtown First Friday events but some First Friday events are busier than others. Bruce added that it is important to promote key events. Lori suggested building on what exists by taking it to the next level and marketing it. Kim noted a new Downtown Business Association that is forming.

Jason emphasized how special Downtown White River Junction's creative economy is, and it can't be replicated easily. He noted that it has grown organically and as such, it is critical in defining who Hartford is and being a focal point of its economy going forward. John Heath asked how the schools tie into it. David Briggs added that this is a huge untapped resource. He suggested more youth-oriented events downtown, in terms of community goodwill and not necessarily for making a profit.

Jason noted that there is an element of inclusivity in the creative economy. Kim noted the importance of sensitivity with language and messaging as well.

3. **Innovative Economy:** Jason noted that Hartford is a highly educated community and surprisingly many jobs in Hartford don't require education. He thinks this is an opportunity. The data show that Hartford is "an innovative community which is characterized by its emphasis on creativity, technology, entrepreneurship and sustainable practices to drive economic growth and development."

Goal: Leverage Hartford's high-skilled local talent and its proximity to world class educational institutions to foster innovation, increase wages and reduce commuting times.

Strategic Actions:

1. Audit and Development of Resources.
2. Public Libraries Collaboration.
3. Local Incubator and Accelerator Program.

Bruce noted that Dartmouth College has incubator space at the Centerra Office Park in Lebanon that has lots of funding that feeds into it. Lori added that the high-tech model is very expensive to set up

and maintain. Bruce suggested there is a local demand for incubator space for wood, stone and metal fabrication and commercial food processing and a butchery. He also believes that many skilled folks in Hartford are underutilized. Havah agreed that creating incubator space is challenging, noting an experience she had with it. She added that it is more about connection to community.

4. **Nature Economy:** Serra noted that the focus of this category is Hartford's rivers and enhancing the quality of life and sense of community as well as preserving historic and cultural significance.

Goal: Enhance outdoor recreation for residents and increase tourism potential in Hartford by expanding and improving river access points.

Strategic Actions:

1. Feasibility Study and Design.
2. Access Points Construction.
3. Promotional Resources.
4. Maintenance Plans.

Serra stated that people living in Hartford typically earn less and pay more for housing. She added that community input indicated that a key reason for people living in Hartford is the high quality of life and many natural amenities. She noted that quality of life is important to employment growth and there is an opportunity to build on this. Kim responded that it has to be tempered, noting an aging population and many living on fixed incomes. John noted that forty years ago, Hartford jobs were primarily based on manufacturing and agriculture, which has changed.

There was discussion about increasing opportunities for river access such as boat launches. Bruce added that with climate change there is more flooding which has damaged past access improvements. Kim noted a current access initiative with the Wilder Dam relicensing, where the Town requested the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) require the property owner open up the pedestrian and bicycle access across Wilder Dam. Matt added that the Town also has requested improvements to Kilowatt Park to increase public access and public amenities. Havah reported that at the Hartford Chamber's recent annual meeting she was surprised that many Hartford businesses were unaware of Wilder Village's history or the available river access at Kilowatt Park. She suggested we need to tell the story. Kim stated that we also should include land acknowledgements for parks.

Conclusion: Lori asked the group if the proposed strategies and subsequent discussions are on the right track. Jason asked if there are other areas that weren't included. Kim noted that Hartford has Vermont Salvage, the Cover Store and other second-hand shopping opportunities which make up a small part of our economy. Jason agreed and noted that including other businesses which are unique to the community is key. Kim stated that she appreciates the content and the presentation, but she would like to see the outline of the whole economic development plan to assess what might be missing.

John Heath stated that the players are limited and include the School District which is a huge entity in Hartford. Jason responded that a focus group with the Hartford Area Career & Technology Center students and an interview was held with the HAC&TC assistant director. David agreed that the day-today linkage with the School District is needed.

John Heath expressed concern about White River Junction becoming car dealership central.

Jason concluded by stating that it was a productive meeting and he appreciated the input. Lori thanked everyone for attending and participating in the discussion.

Next Meeting: Matt reported that the next Planning Commission/Steering Committee meeting is scheduled for Monday, June 10th in Room 2 at 6:00 p.m. He also noted the community meeting on Tuesday, June 18th at 6:00 p.m. which will be completely remote.

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 7:37 p.m.