

Hartford Economic Development Community Forum #2

Approved Minutes

July 16, 2024

Planning and Development Director Lori Hirshfield called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. She noted that the forum is a hybrid meeting and introduced consultants Jason Godfrey and Serra Güllü. She noted that the meeting will be recorded. There were no objections.

Attendance: The following individuals attended the meeting which was held at the Hartford Town Hall in Room 2 at 171 Bridge Street in White River Junction on Tuesday, July 16, 2024. The meeting was also available remotely and several people joined that way.

Planning Commission & Town Plan Steering Committee Members:

Bruce Riddle	Planning Commission, term expires 2/7/25
John Heath	Planning Commission, term expires 3/11/27
Toby Dayman	Planning Commission, term expires 6/28/24
John Reid	Planning Commission, term expires 2/5/27
Colin Butler	Planning Commission, term expires 6/24/2027
Havah Walther	Hartford Area Chamber of Commerce
Kim Souza	Selectboard Liaison to the Planning 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
Sue Buckholz
Adams Carroll
Esme Cole
Reika Hoffman Kiess
Brett Long
Allan Reetz
Brandon Smith
Donna W.

Lori welcomed everyone to the forum. She went over the rules of conduct. She noted that the purpose of the forum is to review the draft goals and strategies and seek community feedback. Lori provided an

overview of the meeting. She noted that although housing is a major economic issue, a separate housing process is underway and requested that we not delve into the subject.

Serra Güllü went over the purpose of the economic development chapter update and the project timeline. She gave an overview of the process:

- a. Economic Analysis
- b. Industry Analysis
- c. Community Engagement
 - I. Community Forum
 - II. Focus Groups
 - High School
 - Developers
 - Small Businesses
 - Organizations
 - III. Community Survey (139 responses)
 - IV. Individual Interviews

She noted that the end goal is a strategic roadmap, a specific task with defined objectives. Serra went over the following terms:

Goal: The overarching opportunity.

Objectives: Specific steps.

Strategic Actions: Detailed actions or activities.

Key metrics: Indicators to measure the effectiveness of the strategic actions and the progress towards the goals.

Serra went over some of the highlights noting that residents are largely very satisfied with the Town and in particular value the recreational and cultural amenities here. Shopping and dining amenities are not highly rated but don't impact the overall satisfaction with the Town. Resident priorities for economic development are small business support and helping locals succeed.

Serra Güllü identified the five major categories:

1. Identity Positioning
2. Village Centers
3. Nature Economy
4. Creative Economy
5. Innovative Economy

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

1. Identity Positioning:

- Understand and agree on economic goals.
- Competitive advantage.

- Sense of pride.
- Directs efforts and resources towards specific economic outcomes.

Jason noted that this is not about marketing, it's all about having a common, shared vision for the community and ensuring that the vision drives decision making.

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

Strategic Actions:

1. Identity statement.
2. Communication plan.
3. Policy alignment.

2. **Village Centers:** Lori noted that the concept is not new and there are visions in place. The issue is how to make progress. She stated that there are three principles:

Identity: Each Village has its own identity that is independent but related to the Town's. Must simultaneously build unity and diversity.

Incrementalism: Progress is the key. Movement towards a recognized objective.

Mobility: Ensure accessible and economical transportation options between and within Village Centers.

Goal: Establish a procedural and organizational framework for Hartford's Village Centers to become vibrant, economically dynamic hubs that enhance community life for villages and surrounding areas and cater to modern preferences for density and diverse amenities.

Strategic Actions:

1. Village Ambassador Program.
2. Visioning.
3. Village Project Application Process.
4. Funding.
5. Phased Development.
6. Public-Private Partnerships.

Public Comments:

Kim Souza noted that we should keep an eye on those villages that don't have a village store such as West Hartford and Wilder. David Briggs agreed and noted the Putney General Store, Pierce's General Store in Shrewsbury and the Brownsville Butcher Shop as successful examples.

3. **Nature Economy:** Matt Osborn noted that quality of life is a more important determinant of economic success for communities than focusing on the business environment. For many who moved here, quality of life was a major factor in the decision to locate here. Natural amenities are an important part of that. Enhancing local natural amenities can have a direct and significant economic impact.

Goal: Expand and improve river access points to enhance the rivers as economic assets to increase the community's desirability as a place to work and live.

Strategic Actions:

1. Feasibility Study and Design.
2. Construction.
3. Promotion.
4. Maintenance Plans.

Public Comments:

Havah Walther agreed that improving river access can improve the quality of life.

Kim Souza noted the trend of increased flooding. She asked if river access is the only option? Jason responded that there are many natural resources here. The idea is to focus on one item and work on implementation. Kim suggested including a broader statement in the chapter beyond river access. Lori noted that we can explore options.

John Reid agreed with the statement on the importance of quality of life. He asked if we should differentiate between the quality of life of Hartford and that of the Upper Valley. Lori responded that there is an interconnected relationship between Hartford and the Upper Valley.

4. **Creative Economy:** Lori noted that the creative economy is a key part of Vermont's identity. Leaning into that is consistent with both the state and the Town's core character. The following are statistics related to the creative economy:

- 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.

Lori noted that Vermont has six creative zones. Hartford and Windsor County along with Orange County fall within the state designated Cornerstone Creative Community District.

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

Strategic Actions:

1. Establish a Creative Economy Steering Committee.
 2. Inventory & Map Hartford's Creative Assets.
 3. Education & Training in the Creative Sector.
 4. Sustain & Develop Creative Spaces.
5. **Innovative Economy:** "Vermont's creative economy is an interconnected tapestry of artisans, innovators, makers, educators, performers, designers, writers, preservationists, and more, working together and individually to enhance the cultural and intellectual landscape of the state." 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." Jason noted that the speed at which artificial intelligence is impacting the economy is rapid. He asked how the Town will position itself to be part of the entrepreneurial arena?

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. Dedicated Shared Maker Spaces.

Public Comments: John Reid stated that there is a decline in the quality of education including the reduction in arts education and noted an increase in home schooling. He asked if the Town should supplement education by providing programs that the schools don't offer. Kim Souza responded that the Parks and Recreation Department offers lots of arts programming as well as camps by Northern Stage, Junction Arts and Media and Craft Studies. Havah Walter agreed and noted other opportunities in nearby Upper Valley communities as well.

Conclusion: Lori asked the group the following questions

- Are we are on the right track?
- Does it make sense?
- Is there anything we are missing?

Colin Butler stated that he thought it was a very good discussion. Regarding the village ambassador concept, he thinks that there is a level of complexity that needs to be flushed out. Regarding education, Colin noted that he has experience serving on school boards. He feels the topic deserves more discussion. He is concerned that charter schools and private schools will divert funds away from public schools and could result in weakening the public school system.

There were no other comments.

Lori thanked everyone for attending and participating in the discussion.

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