



Here's the first issue of the Brandon Downtown Alliance's (the DBA) newsletter, with a little bit of background and news and information on recent activities, upcoming events, and the possibilities now open to us.

Who needs a downtown program and why is it important for Brandon?

Vermont's downtowns and villages have served as the social and economic centers of our communities for generations, playing a key role in a region's economy. Almost one fifth of Vermont's economic activity and jobs are based in our downtowns. Downtowns are areas of intensive capital investment, both public and private, in buildings, water and sewage systems, streets, sidewalks, and parks. Protecting this investment is smart public policy. We are fortunate to have a wealth of historic buildings that make our town centers attractive places to live, work and visit.

However, recent decades have brought tremendous economic, technological and social changes, often with adverse effects on our downtowns. Although the national trend of disinvestment in downtowns - leaving rundown or boarded-up storefronts, vacant upper stories, and reduced tax bases - has not overwhelmed Vermont, the health of our downtowns can be fragile. Sprawl, the dispersed commercial development that is springing up at the fringes of traditional town centers, can diminish the economic viability of our communities and local businesses.

The Vermont Downtown Program was established in 1994 to provide technical assistance and training for communities and to help towns develop skills and strategies for their downtown revitalization efforts. The Program is an affiliate of the National Main Street Center, a division of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which has succeeded in over 1,400 communities nationwide.

The Downtown Development Act, passed in 1998, provides substantial support for downtown revitalization. Towns that receive downtown designation under the Act are eligible for a number of benefits, including tax credits, loans and grants from various state agencies. To qualify, towns must develop a comprehensive revitalization strategy

for the downtown district and demonstrate broad-based community support. The strategy must involve a long-term commitment to enhancing economic opportunities, preserving historic buildings, and improving public spaces and infrastructure in the commercial district.

A few concerned Brandon citizens organized our first Downtown Alliance in 2002 for the purpose of creating Green Park. The alliance was named "24 Center Street" and after soon accomplishing its purpose, it became the organization charged with the revitalization of the downtown. Regrettably, the organization became inactive until 2009 when a downtown designation was registered with the state – but then the town allowed it to languish. Until now.

What the DBA is doing for Brandon

Starting in the fall of last year, a dedicated group who saw the need to revitalize our downtown and were aware of the opportunities a downtown designation provided (to say nothing of taking advantage of the possibilities Irene presented) got together and under the leadership of Steve Beck succeeded in getting Brandon re-certified as a designated downtown. Committees have been meeting and progress is starting. Among the things that have been accomplished:

- "Love a Park" was organized and began upgrading the town's parks
- A town-wide public forum was held at the Congregational Church to start the conversation about rebuilding after Irene
- The debris and trash were removed from Kennedy Park, the grass cut, a new fence installed, and decorated for the Christmas season
- A census and analysis of the town's retail space is being prepared
- A new public forum is planned to discuss the impact of Segment Six which will start this summer –with a presentation from the folks in Barre who are dealing with a similar situation with great success
- The bricks were recovered from Green Park and solicitations for new bricks are well underway

Brandon has a very vibrant Chamber of Commerce and the DBA and the Chamber will be working hand in glove in the months to come, building upon planned events and creating new activities to enrich the town and focus attention on our community. These are all things we can and have done by ourselves, but Vermont's Downtown Programs have many financial opportunities for town, the merchants, and homeowners –

- A state income tax credit of 10% for the costs of substantially rehabilitating a certified historic building is available as an "add on" credit for projects that qualify for the 20% Federal Rehabilitation Investment Tax Credit. Projects qualifying for the 10% credit will thus receive a net 30% credit.
- A state income tax credit of 25% is available for owners or lessees of buildings built prior to 1983 that undertake projects to rehabilitate a building façade or storefront that contributes to the integrity of the designated downtown but does not qualify for the 20% Federal RITC and 10% state add-on above
- A 50% state income tax credit is available to property owners and lessees for the costs of bringing a building into compliance with state building codes

- A rebate of up to \$2,000 of the construction permit fees are available when installing a complete automatic fire sprinkler system
- A municipality may receive a reallocation of sales taxes paid on construction materials used on qualified projects in the designated downtown, to be used in support of the qualified project
- Designated downtowns are eligible to receive loans, loan guarantees, or grants up to \$75,000 from the Vermont Downtown Development Board for capital transportation and related capital improvement projects
- Priority consideration is given by any state agency administering any state or federal assistance program providing funding or other aid to the designated downtown area, provided the project is eligible for the assistance program

The possibilities are almost endless. The DBA and its committees are well underway and are working hard – and there are opportunities for anyone to pitch in. Almost all of Brandon’s storefronts are now occupied... and the excitement is only now starting.