

## **The Southern Vermont Post-Irene Recovery Project funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration**

On Wednesday, December 12<sup>th</sup> the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) announced an award of \$472,000 in support of business and municipal development and resiliency planning in Southern Vermont. The proposal, developed through collaboration among the Windham Regional Commission, the Bennington County Regional Commission, the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation, and the Bennington County Industrial Corporation, is being funded through the FY 2012 Disaster Relief Opportunity administered through the EDA. Each disaster recovery investment is intended to support a community's long-term recovery, spur job creation, leverage private investment, and promote disaster resiliency.

The following is a project summary. Specific details about project execution will be provided in early January.

### **The motivation behind the proposal.**

After a long period of deteriorating economic health, the Southern Vermont Region (Windham and Bennington Counties) was severely impacted by Tropical Storm Irene and the ensuing flooding. In addition to the devastation to infrastructure and municipal services, numerous commercial and community centers were damaged. This disaster resulted in significant challenges to the overall economic health of the Region. The magnitude of the disaster recovery, on top of the preexisting economic malaise, has overwhelmed the existing capacity to recover from this disaster. Towns and businesses have been heavily focused on recovery and navigating disaster recovery programs. As a result, there has been little time and few resources to focus on long term recovery, development, and resiliency.

The Windham Regional Commission (WRC) and Bennington County Regional Commission (BCRC), along with our correlating Regional Development Corporations, the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation and the Bennington County Industrial Corporation, applied for assistance from EDA to aide our Region's recovery. The Southern Vermont Region covers approximately 1475 sq. miles with 41 towns. In the absence of county government, the Regional Planning Commissions provide the critical link between local, state and federal government programs.

### **The proposal purpose and partners.**

This application was developed in consultation with, and the support of, numerous partners. This program will bring critically needed capacity to Southern Vermont businesses and "main streets" for recovery. This capacity is critical for building the necessary private-public partnerships needed for our economy to recover, diversify and grow more resilient.

Partners in this endeavor include the following:

- Bennington Area Chamber of Commerce
- Better Bennington Corporation
- Brattleboro Area Chamber of Commerce
- Building a Better Brattleboro
- Manchester and the Mountains Chamber of Commerce
- Mount Snow Valley Chamber of Commerce
- Preservation Trust of Vermont
- Southeastern Vermont Economic Development Strategy
- Town of Bennington
- Town of Brattleboro
- Town of Dover
- Town of Wilmington
- Vermont Agency of Natural Resources
- Vermont Agency of Transportation
- Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development
- Vermont Small Business Development Center

A key component to the execution of this project will be the establishment of two flood recovery offices that will serve the Southern Vermont Region. Each flood recovery office will be staffed with a 1 FTE professional that will be responsible for:

1. Coordinating a Business Resource Service Center
2. Assisting with Village and Downtown business district revitalization.

## **Project tasks.**

### ***Task 1: Coordinating Business Resource Service Centers***

Windham and Bennington Counties have just over 3,400 businesses employing just fewer than 39,000 people. It is estimated that 39% (1,320) of the businesses representing 38% (15,000) of the jobs in southern Vermont were impacted by Tropical Storm Irene.<sup>1</sup> Before the storm there were already numerous commercial spaces that sat empty. Since the storm that number has grown dramatically as some businesses have chosen not to rebuild, or are still in the process of deciding. For example, in Brattleboro it is estimated that 16-25% of prime downtown retail space in Brattleboro sat empty after a devastating fire (April 2011) on Main Street that gutted a large anchor building. Tropical Storm Irene exacerbated the problem in Brattleboro and other

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<sup>1</sup> Based on SBA application issue data and local data collected from businesses, it is estimated that between 15-20% of Southern Vermont businesses were directly impacted. This represents 680 directly impacted businesses needing to be served, with an estimated additional 20% of businesses indirectly, negatively, impacted also to be served for an estimated total of 1320 businesses served representing roughly 15,000 existing jobs.

commercial centers in southern Vermont. A winter without much snow added insult to injury for businesses throughout the region.

Through the Business Resource Center, southern Vermont business owners and entrepreneurs will have personalized access to information about resources to assist startups, worker and help existing business thrive. Recovery officers will work with businesses to evaluate their needs, provide technical assistance, and also act as a clearing house to direct clients to appropriate other technical assistance resources such as Vermont Small Business Development Center, Vermont Economic Development Authority, Vermont Community Loan Fund and Vermont Community Development Program. Business Resource Staff will also provide assistance with local and state permitting and sustainable effective marketing strategies.

It is estimated that the Business Resource Service Center will serve existing and start up businesses throughout southern Vermont. Outreach to encourage use of the Center will include:

- Southern Vermont Sustainable Marketing program (see below)
- One (1) Direct mail postcard to commercial and downtown property owners
- Facebook and twitter accounts
- Radio and newspaper interviews and press releases
- Four (4) Chambers of Commerce emailing members
- Public meetings
- Regional Planning Commissioner e-mailing municipalities, posting on website, and asking Commissioners to contact businesses in their communities.

The Business Resource Center will also provide information to its clientele through workshops on such issues as business planning, marketing and continuity of operations planning.

As part of the FEMA ESF 14 long term community planning recovery process in the towns of Wilmington and Dover, it was identified that there is not a consistent Southern Vermont brand to market the area for tourism and business/employee recruitment. A marketing person will be hired to work with recovery officers and partners to develop the Southern Vermont Sustainable Marketing program. This is a regionally initiated research, analysis and program development process designed to provide a mechanism for the Windham and Bennington Region development organizations, employers and tourism dependent businesses to create long-term marketing strategies. Those strategies will be targeted to grow the economy by adding new businesses, new employees from those presently unemployed and underemployed in Southern Vermont, and attracting visitors, all of which will be supported in the long-term through regional economic development efforts. The scope of work includes evaluating existing employer and tourism marketing efforts, current targeted markets, and employer and tourism brands to create a large marketing umbrella brand for Southern Vermont that can be used by

all of those entities, and to create annual cooperative marketing plans with a cooperative sustainable funding mechanism.

Lastly, using the existing cooperative marketing network between the four chambers and the Vermont Department of Tourism, the Mount Snow Valley Chamber and the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing will develop a highly trackable out of state marketing campaign for the Fall/Early Winter 2012 or Winter/Spring 2013 campaign (dependent on timing of grant). The purpose of the marketing campaign will be to provide immediate-term collaborative tourism marketing until the long-term strategies discussed above are completed and implemented.

***Task 2: Assisting with Village and Downtown “Business District” Revitalization***

The Southern Vermont Region is a rural area. The largest towns, Brattleboro and Bennington, have populations of 12,005 and 15,764 respectively. Over half of the 41 towns have fewer than 1,000 residents. Our small towns lack the financial resources of higher populated areas to deliver services such as business support and downtown development. The cost per person of delivering basic infrastructure and services, such as roads, education, and electricity is high. In addition, there are few businesses in these small communities, which have shifted the tax burden disproportionately on homeowners. What commercial activity that these communities have was severely impacted by Tropical Storm Irene.

Many of these communities have historic densely settled downtowns and villages, and these areas contain public and private investment in infrastructure such as buildings, streets, sidewalks, parks, and, in some, water and sewer systems. Southern Vermont is home to forty (40) historic villages and three (3) historic downtowns. Generally, all southern Vermont villages and downtowns were impacted by Tropical Storm Irene. Some were directly and severely impacted such as Wilmington Village, where both inundation and fluvial erosion caused extreme damage to buildings and business. Others, such as Bennington, had damage to their municipal infrastructure that resulted in loss of commercial activity and tourist business during fall 2011. Still others, such as Jamaica in Windham County, did not lose commercial businesses but literally lost land area in the heart of the village to fluvial erosion.

The Flood Recovery Officers, working with WRC and BCRC, will assist municipalities with economic recovery. A prime focus of this work will be village and downtown revitalization. Regional Planning Commission staff and the flood recovery officers will work with the municipalities on long-term planning processes to identify projects and assist with finding funding that will best enable their community to become more economically resilient. For example, Wilmington Village, through the FEMA ESF 14 planning effort, identified the need for parking and signage to enhance the commercial activity. Work through this grant will allow

staff to indentify public and private sources of funding to assist the community in meeting its long-term vision. Other communities which did not benefit from the FEMA long term planning process will be assisted with a modified version of the process to help identify projects and funding sources. As part of this process WRC and BCRC will provide mapping assistance through their extensive geographic information system (GIS) services.

While this effort will help villages and downtowns identify long-term goals, it is our intent to move quickly on initiatives that can be implemented in the immediate and near-term to revitalize village centers and downtowns. We want to build on early successes in these communities.

The State of Vermont has a strong downtown and village center designation program. The Vermont Downtown program is modeled on the National Trust's Main Street Program and has seen much success with downtown and village center revitalization. Currently, there are three designated downtowns (Bennington, Brattleboro and Bellows Falls) and twenty (20) designated village centers in the southern Vermont Region. To assist with recovery the Flood Recovery Officers, working with WRC, BCRPC and the State of Vermont Downtown Program will target attention to these designated village centers and downtowns through long-term planning, capacity building and funding of projects. Additionally, staff will work with communities that do not have designated village centers and downtown to assist them in exploring the opportunity for designation and obtaining designation where appropriate. Relying upon the structure of the National Main Street Program and Vermont's Downtown Program will allow the Flood Recovery Officers and RPC Staff to work in a large number of communities to pursue these planning objectives. The two programs provide a tight focus on success-proven methodologies to bring revitalization to villages and downtowns.

Designated downtowns have experienced staff dedicated to seeing their downtown revitalized. Unfortunately, the village centers do not and could benefit from more training and peer to peer exchanges. To that end, RPC Staff, State of Vermont Downtown Program staff, Vermont Agency of Transportation and Brattleboro and Bennington downtown association staff will hold up to six meetings with the southern Vermont Village Centers to exchange information on ways to make their villages and downtowns more economically resilient.

### ***Task 3: Project Management/Administration***

The work of the Flood Recovery Officers will receive guidance on the overall recovery mission, strategy, and key policy decisions from the two Southern Vermont Redevelopment Corporations and Regional Planning Commissions, and the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development, via monthly meetings. The Windham Regional Commission retains overall project management decision making as outlined by the grant application. The WRC will

manage all financial, reporting and auditing tasks. These include management of the cooperative agreement, monitoring and amending (if needed) the EDA/WRC cooperative agreement, overall project coordination, reporting, and managing any related sub-consultant agreements.