

# Civic Infrastructure

Most Vermont towns spend millions of dollars and many dozens of hours each year maintaining infrastructure, planning for it, and probably arguing about it. We all know that roads and bridges, cell towers, and fiber-optic lines are essential for thriving local economies and quality of life. If your town is thinking long term, you're likely also looking at green infrastructure. Healthy natural systems can absorb and filter stormwater, minimize heat impacts, and protect drinking water – all saving money, protecting property, and meeting community needs.

But very few communities anywhere in the U.S. are strategically planning for or investing in civic infrastructure. Every single town should be.

Built infrastructure is the physical structures and systems that allow a community to function. Civic infrastructure is the culture and systems that allow people to connect, work together, get information, solve problems, and create a thriving community. Civic infrastructure supports many of the things Vermonters value most: engaged and connected communities, local democracy, independence, and resourcefulness. It's also the key factor in whether we can function together as towns, make decisions, respond to disasters or challenges, and take advantage of opportunities.

What does it look like when civic infrastructure is strong? Vermont is a great place to take a peek, and here are some examples of towns that are doing it well:

- Middlesex distributes an “Operators’ Manual” to the community. This invaluable guide has information for all residents on how the community works, where to find information and help, and how to participate and get involved.
- Windham County and the Upper Valley have strong COADs – Community Organizations Active in Disaster. COADs are teams of local organizations (like hospitals, fire and rescue groups, churches, shelters, and social service providers). They meet regularly and build relationships, so they are ready to mobilize and work together the instant disaster strikes.
- Morrisville keeps finding creative new ways to enliven its downtown and public spaces. Each year, it invites local artists to paint Adirondack chairs, which are placed around

town to offer outdoor seating in the summer and auctioned off as a fundraiser in the fall. This year, high school students just finished banners and stories about diverse local leaders, which help people get to know one another and celebrate leadership while adding color and vibrancy to the downtown streetscape.

- In my town, Bethel, we're in the midst of our sixth season of Bethel University – a community pop-up university. During March of each year, anyone can teach a class on any topic under the sun, and everyone can take classes for free. In addition to courses on bread baking and knitting, “BU” has become a platform for local groups and committees to reach new volunteers and educate the community on everything from wilderness medicine to invasive species removal.
- In many Vermont towns, Front Porch Forum has taken dialogue and communication to a whole new level. With dozens of daily messages, it creates a way for people to connect with neighbors, instantly get and share information, and practice civil discussion. (Yes, practice is the operative word.)
- These examples highlight some of the ingredients in strong civic infrastructure: gathering places, information channels, relationships and connections. It's far more important and less common to take a holistic look, but Randolph, Braintree, and Brookfield have been doing just that. A group spent the last year taking inventory of what's available and what's needed in terms of community meeting spaces, activities, and opportunities for social connection, and identifying recommendations to strengthen those areas. The emerging needs may seem like a lower priority than potholes (or at least draw fewer angry phone calls). But investments in civic infrastructure will pay off in more volunteers and fewer expectations on government, more collaboration and less overlap, more support for local businesses and fewer Main Street vacancies, and more civic participation and fewer civic battles.

There is no single recipe for building stronger civic infrastructure. There are a dozen other ingredients and ways of combining them. It's up to your town to find creative ways to mix and match, stir and sauté. Start with small, inexpensive projects: invite your neighbors to join Front Porch Forum and plop a chair or two on a street corner. And start together: invite a new neighbor for coffee and civil dialogue. Better yet, invite a whole group to take a look at where civic infrastructure is strong in your community and where it needs to be stronger. If you'd like to learn more about ingredients and examples of civic infrastructure, next month's Economic Development Forum at Burke Mountain (see details on page 14) will be a great place to start.

It's up to you to get cooking.

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*Community Workshop is a Vermont consulting firm that offers creative engagement, planning, placemaking, and effective communications to towns, cities, and non-profit organizations across North America.*