

VPA 2016 Awards Project Nomination

Name of Project: The Mad River Valley Economic Study and Economic Vitality Series, 2014/15

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Please provide brief (up to one page) summary of the project:

The Mad River Valley (MRV) in central Vermont is largely comprised of three towns (Waitsfield, Warren and Fayston), each with different goals and roles to play in the regional economy. Heavily influenced by mountain resort tourism and a legacy of agriculture, planning for the future was stuck on what the economics of the region HAD been rather on what they ARE. Out of this concern grew the 2014/15 Mad River Valley Economic Study, which has been able to cast new light on what was really happening in the MRV and how the understanding of tourism, recreation and agriculture can be combined into a potent strategy for future regional economic sustainability.

The Mad River Valley contains a rich variety of economic sectors (chiefly: recreation, tourism, agriculture, & professional business), as well as vulnerability from crippling floods (Tropical Storm Irene) and the broader impacts of climate change. In 2013, the community began an effort to better position itself for its unknown future through a watershed-wide economic analysis and community engagement process.

The project has focused on understanding and quantifying the MRV's economic profile and economic health by assessing relevant data and interviews, identifying industry sectors of strategic importance, establishing a MRV economic baseline, and exploring initiatives that support its economic future. The study was commissioned by The Mad River Valley Planning District and completed by a consultant team consisting of SE Group (Mark Kane), Birchline Planning LLC (Julie Beth Hinds, AICP) & Doug Kennedy Advisors (Doug Kennedy). A 2013 Municipal Planning Grant from the Vermont Agency of Commerce & Community Development and a contribution from the MRV Chamber of Commerce funded the study.

Results from the initial studies were presented to the community at the MRV Economic Summit & Community Picnic on June 4th, 2014, which drew over 250 community members. Public input was provided regarding the Valley's economic future, vitality, and resilience.

Immediately following the release of the Economic Study, the Mad River Valley Planning District initiated an Economic Vitality Series (EVS) to lead the community through the

study's recommendations. A series of nine community workshops were conducted over three months in the summer of 2015. Each workshop covered a unique sector of the economy; lodging, retail, manufacturing, agriculture and food, etc. Participants in each workshop included invited business owners, key community stakeholders and the general public. Through brief presentations and breakout focus groups, each meeting explored more fully the role each sector plays in the regional economy and more specifically how policy might support or enhance each economic sector.

The information gleaned from these workshops was reframed into a draft Economic Action Plan crafted by representatives from each sector who met following the workshops. A second economic summit was held in December 2015 at which a MRV Community Vision and draft Economic Action Plan were presented.

Please describe how the project meets each of the criteria below (up to 3 pages for questions 1-6 together):

1. Originality: To what extent are creative and innovative ideas used to address a demonstrated need or program? How have ideas expanded the envelope of accepted planning principles and led to a greater level of success?

By design, the work under the initial part of the project was “data heavy,” combining a wide variety of relevant statistical datasets from the past decade, complimented by empirical research on past trends in business operations. This approach was intentional. While longer-term trends might be interesting, the fact is that more contemporary influences in tourism, agriculture, business finance and public investment have significantly altered the MRV’s economic landscape. Understanding and responding to these influence is the most important consideration relative to developing new policies and priorities. Although filled with data, the initial report is readable and “user friendly.” The tone is more conversational than academic. The consultant team did not want to bury important details under statistical cover. So they highlighted key points throughout the report.

The public process and continuation of the work beyond the publication of the Economic Study is very original. Rather than letting the work sit on a shelf, the MRVPD embraced the effort by establishing the Economic Vitality Series (EVS) to continue discussion on how key sectors of the regional economy could be better supported. These efforts culminated in a more refined and broadly discussed community-based action plan that is now moving towards implementation.



2. Transferability: How does the project provide example for others?

As a small region where tourism and economics are closely linked, the study demonstrates how socioeconomic and demographic information can be mined for relevancy towards policy. In addition, the lessons learned from the ongoing use of the study within a public engagement process are of considerable relevancy to local/regional planners. The main components of the MRV Economic Study included evaluation of existing economic trends and establishment of quantitative and qualitative underpinnings for future regional economic development policy. This topic and the information that the study provided can be transferred to other areas of the state, region and even other regions in the US. In fact, the economic profile and issues identified in the MRV Economic Study is highly correlated and relevant to many areas where the role of agriculture has been shifting from traditional dairy operations to more value-added, specialized agri-business. In addition, the evolving nature of recreational tourism, particularly in areas influenced by mountain resorts, is also a broader trend that the MRV Economic Study addressed in significant detail. These trends also intersect the broader climate change discussion; whereby strategies for economic resilience may require rethinking of long-held beliefs about the role tourism and agriculture play in a regional economy.

This project was presented at the APA Northeastern Conference in the spring of 2015 under the title [Aligning Realities: The Nexus of Economics, Recreation, Tourism and Agriculture in a Classic New England Community Now and Future](#). The session was popular and extremely well received by attendees across the northeast. The other planners present really liked the fresh approach to the data and methodology. Specifically, the project's "go beyond the data" approach and the way the business community had been engaged throughout the process. Many expressed interest in applying the information learned in their home communities.

3. Quality: How does the project relate to overall community aspirations and vision? To what extent does the project show excellence of thought, analysis, writing, and graphics, as well as the application of ethical planning principles? How were resources used in a well-conceived and appropriate format?

The core purpose of the project was to facilitate policy development and implementation in support of economic vitality and resilience by the towns of Warren, Waitsfield and Fayston. The three consulting firms brought to the project expertise in resort community planning, economic analysis, and policy planning. In order to understand and quantify the Valley's economic profile and health, the consultant team set out to assess relevant quantitative data and conduct qualitative interviews with area stakeholders.

The work started by identifying several important "organizing principles" that play an important (and often overlooked) role in the MRV's economy—principles that are critical to effective policy development:

- Seasonality and fluctuations,
- Population growth in the 35-45 age cohort, but declines in the 18-34 age cohort
- Pronounced mismatch between the age, condition and supply of residential, agricultural and commercial buildings and contemporary needs

- Data and information gaps, such as the share of day skier expenditures captured within the MRV and the share of income generated by home businesses
- Difficulty in gaining and maintaining popular consensus on important trends, such as lodging occupancy labor market dynamics and the relative share of the economy represented by ski areas
- The MRV's small size, which belies the importance of its role as a leading indicator for important economic and cultural trends.

By recognizing these special aspects of the Valley, the consultants were able identify key data points to address them. The use of economic data to drive planning decisions is a hallmark of modern community planning. The techniques used for quantitative analysis of socio-demographic data, qualitative analysis of economic trends and the development of an engagement process are representative of advance planning concepts and skills.

The community engagement portion of the MRV Economic Summit & Community Picnic included a “dot voting” exercise eliciting community response to the economic data. The results of this exercise, in addition to a subsequent community survey, provided overall community aspirations and vision on its economic future.

Perhaps most importantly, the Economic Study provided the framework for the ongoing community conversation on economic vitality. Rather than let the final document sit on a shelf, the community leveraged the guidance from the work as a basis for its Economic Vitality Series and subsequent 2nd Economic Summit. This has allowed the broader community conversation about how to leverage changes to the regional economy to continue and to further refine; greatly improving its relevancy and prospects for success.



4. Comprehensiveness: How have planning principles been observed, especially in support of other public objectives? To what extent does the project produce results for other programs important to the local community?

The statistical analysis focused on providing time series and geographic comparisons for the defined study area (the three Mad River Valley Towns). A variety of data sources were used, working with the MRV Planning District's Annual Data Reports as a base source. Where possible, data was provided for the period year 2000 to current, and geography based data was provided for the study area, Washington County and Vermont. In addition, current and past economic studies and surveys from within the MRV and other resort areas were reviewed.

The consultant team wanted to assure that reliance on statistics was balanced with consideration of factors "on the ground." An array of stake holders were engaged during the process to get ideas from, as well as bounce ideas off of, and to help the team explore more fully how the local economy is working. The stakeholders came from both within the MRV (and included a range of residents, business owners or managers, business employees, as well as organizations and programs that serve the Valley) and state agencies (such as Department of Agriculture and The Land Trust). The strategic use of "qualitative" data, including a historical timeline of business activity within the Valley, was also provided to help anchor statistical metrics against public perception.

The work of the MRV Economic Study and subsequent MRV Economic Summit & Community Picnic provided the basis for a next step process, the MRV Vision & Vitality Workshop Series, currently underway. This collaborative endeavor consisted of a series of 9 Economic Vitality Workshops through 2015 designed to establish a watershed-wide community vision and creation of working sessions from economic sectors identified in the 2014 economic study focused on (1) developing action steps to strengthen the individual sectors, (2) developing leading indicators for each sector, and (3) identifying strategies that will effectively integrate individual sectors with other sectors and the broader MRV economy. All of the Economic Vitality Workshop sessions have been completed and were popular and successful. In the fall of 2015, designated representatives from each workshop session gathered over several meetings to refine a MRV Community Vision Statement and develop the draft Economic Action Plan. This plan was presented at a second MRV Economic Summit in December of 2015. A primary objective of this final meeting was not simply to "unveil" the plan, but rather to reaffirm the need for community members to help implement the actions described in the plan. Key information stations covering topics like recreation, health and wellness, transportation, etc., were set up where residents could sign up to help move action elements forward. Representatives of the asset areas spoke to the group, outlining the work they are doing to improve the vitality of their sectors

In many ways the entire process was crafted to establish a volunteer army of local residents, second home owners, business owners and other key stakeholders who want to actively guide the MRV as it seeks to strengthen and revitalize its regional economy.

5. Public Participation: How much support has there been for the project, and how has the project encouraged participation to address the demonstrated need or problem? To what extent has the project included those left out of similar efforts in the past?

In addition to the work with stakeholders, a summit and picnic was held to present the report and get feedback. Approximately 250 people from across the Mad River Valley attended the June 4th summit; attendees included a broad cross-section of the community. An online survey was also completed by about 20 people. The public input from the attendees and survey respondents offered valuable insight into community priorities and goals for economic vitality in the region. A “dot exercise” was undertaken at the Summit, demonstrating the range of opinions on a variety of economic topics and divided into four sectors (Tourism/Recreation, Agriculture/Food System, Professional Services, and Manufacturing/Incubation).



The community input largely supported the MRV Economic Study findings, highlighting the importance of “quality of life” in attracting and retaining residents and businesses to the MRV. 84% of respondents strongly agreed that “quality of life” in the MRV accounts for their choice to live here, with 60% identifying the MRV as a great place to work and the same percentage stating that MRV schools support their decision to live here. Respondents suggested a desire for the following types of businesses to open in the MRV: more year-round employers, an affordable café, discount recreational clothing, a gym, and a co-working hub.

Through the summer and fall of 2015, the MRVPD, MRVCC and local business consultant Patricia Floyd, are leading the Economic Vitality Series (EVS), designed to create a discussion with the business community around the issues and opportunities that arise while doing businesses in the MRV. A community questionnaire on its vision and the importance of vitality was broadly distributed. The nine Economic Vitality Workshop sessions were all very popular and successful with attendees averaging between 25-40 people in general. The December meeting had over 250 people attending and committing to further support implementation and action.



6. Results: How has the project addressed the need or problem that prompted its initiation? What circumstances or initiative made this the right time to be able to achieve the goals of the community? How have the results made a difference in the lives of the people affected?

The project has led to broad community engagement and constructive dialogues. The work focused on finding ways to implement the recommendations of the initial economic summit by (1) establishing a community-held vision to serve as a framework and backdrop for the economic conversations that are taking place, and (2) establishing a deeper understanding of business needs. The areas of focus included: increase quantifying measures, develop an economic dashboard (to provide timely insights for business owners and to explore the interconnections between economic sectors), have a better understanding of economic policies, and integrate community thinking into the process.

The Economic Vitality Workshop series provided tools and a framework designed to empower the MRV's economically diverse community to address a variety of trending topics – specifically economic, demographic, climate, and resilience. This work culminated in an all-sectors meeting to develop an overarching economic action plan for discussion in a wider forum (at second MRV Economic Summit held in the winter of 2015), ultimately crafting recommendations for the MRV Planning District and local policy makers. This 2015 MRV Economic Summit summarized three years of work in understanding and establishing next steps with the unveiling of the community derived MRV Economic Statement and MRV Economic Action Plan. It also launched the community forward through a continuing process on implementation and action, involving recommendations to the MRV towns of policies, projects and programs necessary to foster balance, sustainable and resilient economic growth, especially in the strategic economic sectors, and help in providing a basis for assessment over time.





Related Links:

[MRV Economic Study \(June, 2014\)](#)

Results from the [MRV Economic Summit Survey](#)

View the [slides from the June 4, 2014 MRV Economic Summit](#)

Watch the [video of the June 4, 2014 MRV Economic Summit](#)

[Overview of the EVS Sector Descriptions](#)

[Community Vision and Vitality Questionnaire](#)