

Chapter 8: Community Involvement

INTRODUCTION

Residents of the Rutland Region have a long history of direct involvement in local organizations and town governance, as well as a tradition of knowing and helping out their neighbors. Healthy communities are ones in which residents play an active role. In the Rutland Region the need for civic engagement is high; most towns rely heavily on the opinion and / or work of volunteers to maintain basic operations. Innovative planning and development takes active local leadership that forms broad coalitions between people of varying backgrounds and skills.

This chapter of the Regional Plan examines the relationship between civic engagement and the planning of vibrant communities. Civic engagement, for the purposes of this chapter, means actions taken by individuals for the betterment of a larger community. Of equal importance, but addressed only tangentially, are one-on-one, neighbor-to-neighbor relationships.

special town meetings called by the local legislative body or by petition. Local voting takes two basic forms: from the floor and by Australian ballot (see definitions).

Generally (though not in every community), ballot items include election of local officials (including, in three communities, the planning commission) and voting upon municipal budgets, district or union district school budgets, special funding requests, and local decisions.

The chart below shows use of these two methods of voting by communities in the Rutland Region. The majority of communities use Australian ballot voting for key budgetary and electoral items. As a general rule, the larger municipalities tend to have more of the decisions made by Australian ballot than do smaller towns. The use of the two methods in the Region's communities is generally consistent with those in the rest of the State, with the exception of Chittenden County municipalities, which almost entirely use Australian ballots.



DEFINITIONS

“Voting From the Floor” is what we generally picture a Vermont Town Meeting to be like – it is when people gather together at a public meeting place like the town hall or local school to discuss and vote on issues. Floor meetings can last a few hours – or they can go all day. The length of the meeting depends on how many articles are on the warning and how much discussion there is over the issues raised by the articles.

“Australian Ballot” voting takes only a few minutes. It takes place at a polling place where voters mark a secret ballot which is counted when the polls close. This is how we cast our ballots at the general election in November. Town Boards of Civil Authority determine when the polls open in the morning (between 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. and all polls must close at 7:00 p.m.

CURRENT CONDITIONS

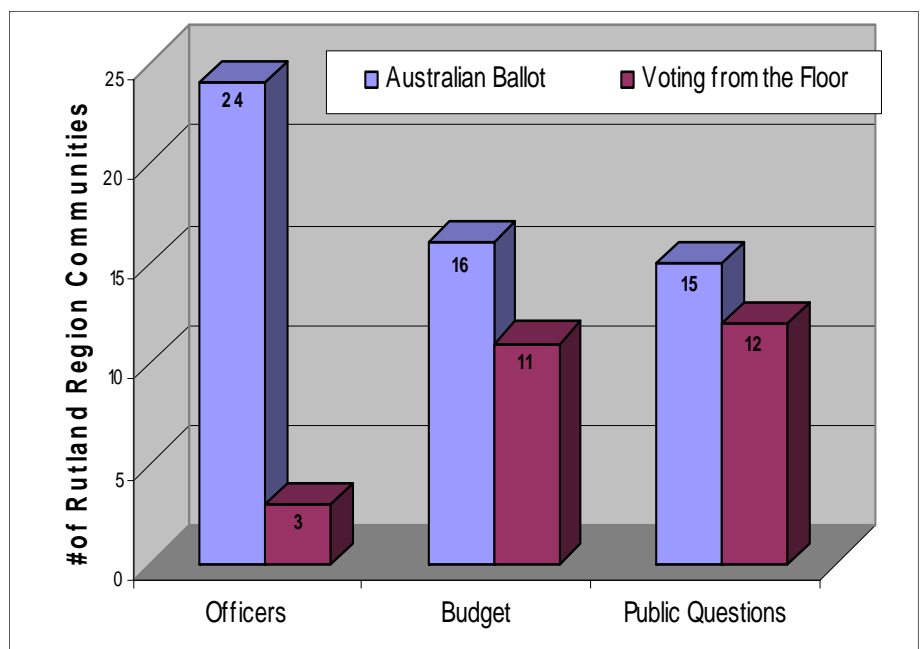
Public involvement takes multiple forms in the Region. Three in particular are addressed below: voting, participation in local or regional activities, and volunteerism at the local or regional level. Each of these represents important forms of participation, and reflects a level of commitment to the community.

Voting

Town Meeting

Local public decision-making takes place annually at Town Meeting, held the first Saturday or Tuesday in March (depending on the town), and at warned

MUNICIPAL VOTING CHOICES IN RUTLAND COUNTY



Source: Vermont Secretary of State website. Data reflects 2006 choices.



Community participation is most obviously essential when it comes to the provision of emergency services. The vast majority of towns in the Rutland Region rely upon volunteers to fill the various roles from the Fire Department to Constable to Emergency Management Coordinator to Health Officer. See the Emergency Management section for a broader discussion of trends in volunteerism.

Voter turnout in local elections vary wildly by community and the issues at hand. For ballot items voted upon by Australian ballot, the region-wide turnout average between 2001 and 2006 was 29.2%; with figures ranging from a low of 23.9% in 2001 to a high of 33.5% in 2004. Looking at the data on a town-by-town basis, average turnout has ranged from 50.8% in Danby to 13.8% in Killington. Danby's high turnout appears to be due in part to a substantial number and proportion of absentee ballots cast each year. Throughout this period, the town of Tinmouth had no Australian ballot votes at Town meeting day.

Community Participation

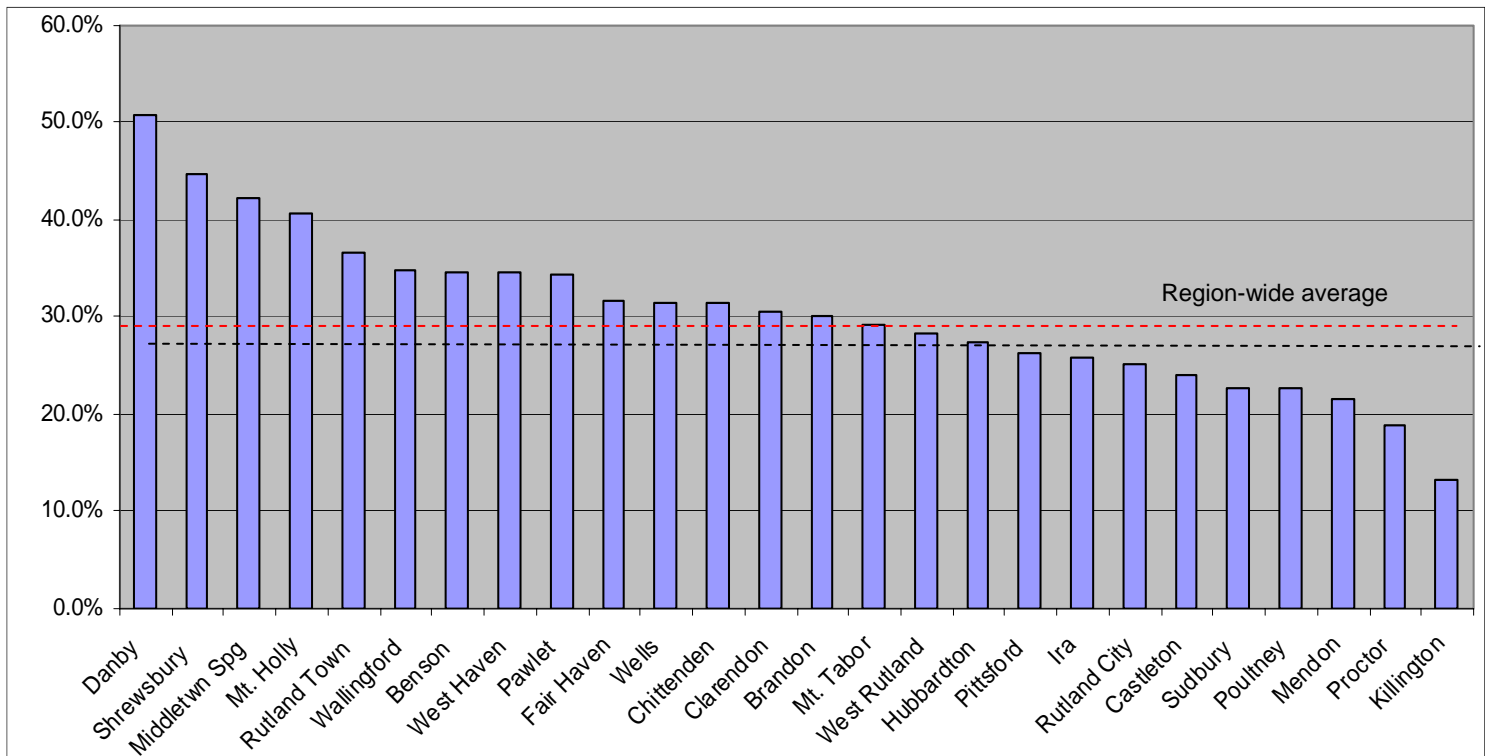
Community action and participation are at the basis of our democracy and at the core of Yankee tradition. The

health of a community can largely be judged by the depth of civic engagement. The more active community members are in positive projects, the more vibrant a place it is in which to live, work, play and do business.

Participation in local and region-wide events varies greatly by the subject, intended audience, cost, marketing, quality, and, where applicable, perceived need. The Region's residents have shown a great commitment to donating time and money to worthy causes serving the Rutland Region. Annual events such as the game suppers in Tinmouth and Pawlet supporting fire departments, and food drives such as Stuff-a-Bus, are always successful and have, in recent years, broken attendance and donation records.

High rates of participation are also

**TOWN MEETING DAY TURNOUT:
AVERAGE PERCENTAGE OF REGISTERED VOTERS CASTING AUSTRALIAN BALLOTS, 2001-2006**



Source: Vermont Secretary of State, 2007. Note: data is based on individual town reporting. Data for certain individual towns in individual years is missing. Note also that during this period, the town of Tinmouth had no Town Meeting Day votes by Australian ballot.

seen in community events that are long-standing traditions and / or generally entertaining to families. These include music in the park, spaghetti dinners, holiday festivals and others. But beyond attendance is the fact that each of these events is organized and run by volunteers from the community, most often without any professional or significant financial backing. This has the effect of not only providing a place for the community to gather and have fun together—but also builds relationships between volunteers and serves as an outlet for someone to get involved in making their community a “better place”. These types of activities can often be an introduction to more in-depth volunteerism described below.

Volunteerism

The backbone of the Rutland Region communities is its volunteers. From elected positions, to volunteer first responders, to faith-based services and non-profit organizations, communities in Vermont lean heavily on an ongoing tradition of service by members of the community. In the Vermont Business Roundtable’s 2005 Pulse of Vermont Survey, 55% of adults responding indicated that they had done unpaid volunteer work in the prior 12 months. This can range from basic participation – addressed in the previous section, to substantial commitments of time and energy to non-profit organizations, churches and other places of worship, and municipal boards and offices. The number and range of organizations that make use of volunteers is broad.

It is the willingness of these volunteers to donate their time and energy that helps to shape the future of communities. Whether through attendance at a public visioning session related to a Town Plan, or serving on a

Town’s Planning Commission or Development Review Board, or taking an idea or strategy from a Town Plan to implement it - how a community develops is largely dependent upon the hard work and dedication of citizen boards and commissions made up of individuals willing to listen to their neighbors, learn about planning issues, and take a stand for the future of their community.

UNMET NEEDS

There is fear, and anecdotal evidence, that volunteerism and “sense of place” is on the decline among communities in the Rutland Region.

Service organizations are no longer a central feature of community life, nor, arguably, is the community.

The potential implications of declines in community participation are widespread, some of which are detailed on following pages.



FAST FACT

Volunteerism in Planning

Volunteer groups most often involved in planning work:

- Regional Planning Commission members
- Town planning commissions, selectboards, zoning boards of adjustment, conservation commissions, and development review boards
- Fire departments, rescue squads, town emergency planning teams, the American Red Cross, and several other groups involved in emergency preparedness and response
- Regional organizations, addressing housing, natural resources, business development, and education



Town of Tinnmouth

Residents of Tinnmouth donate their time to build a children’s playground next to the Community Center

CASE STUDY:

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN MOUNT HOLLY

In 2002, an unofficial straw-poll at Town Meeting indicated that residents of Mount Holly wanted to address the issue of uncontrolled development. The Planning Commission proceeded to explore whether residents of the Town of Mount Holly were interested in developing greater local control over development and learning ways to implement such a goal. Public decision-making and public education were the core features of the project.

In the ten years leading up to the 2003 project, the town of Mt Holly witnessed an average of ten new homes built a year, accounting for approximately 15% of the total housing stock in the town. More than half of the houses built were second or vacation homes, in part related to the existence of Okemo Mountain in the neighboring town of Ludlow. Throughout this period, the town operated with an official Town Plan and subdivision regulations. The State's on-site septic system laws and Act 250 governed some developments.

In the Summer of 2002 the planning commission established a Working Group (members of the select board, planning commission, and six to eight residents) that conducted a survey. A strong response rate led to plans for community-wide discussions. Land Works Inc. was hired using Municipal Planning Grant funds that the Town had applied for. The Working Group planned and hosted a series of five forums that introduced residents to development trends in town, the basics of land use regulations, and what state and local regulations were already in place. Over one-third of the adult residents of the town attended at least one forum. Regular updates appeared in the town's monthly newsletter. A photo contest to identify what people valued about the town and its history was held in conjunction with the meetings. The photos were displayed and adult and child winners selected.

At the final workshop, residents were asked whether they felt the town should move ahead and draft a land use regulation for review by the town. A significant majority voted in favor of this.

The Working Group formed subcommittees to study the top four issues that had emerged from the community forums: maintenance of the rural nature of the town, its village and hamlets, and its historic heritage; affordable housing; economic development; and continuance of the community's close social relationships.

Over the course of the next year, the Planning Commission, together with the Rutland Regional Planning Commission, developed a simple but complete land use regulation for public review. Residents were kept informed of progress by a variety of methods, including regular updates in the town newsletter, email notices and invitations, open public meetings, and personal communication. In October 2005, after informal and warned public hearings, the select board voted to adopt the regulation. The decision, as expected, was petitioned to go to a town-wide vote in January. Hot debate during the fall of 2005 concluded with a vote that rejected the land use regulation.

A simple glance at the process would suggest that in the end, the town was left where it began, with simple subdivision regulations and no zoning ordinance. But there was success to the program that yielded the following tangible results:

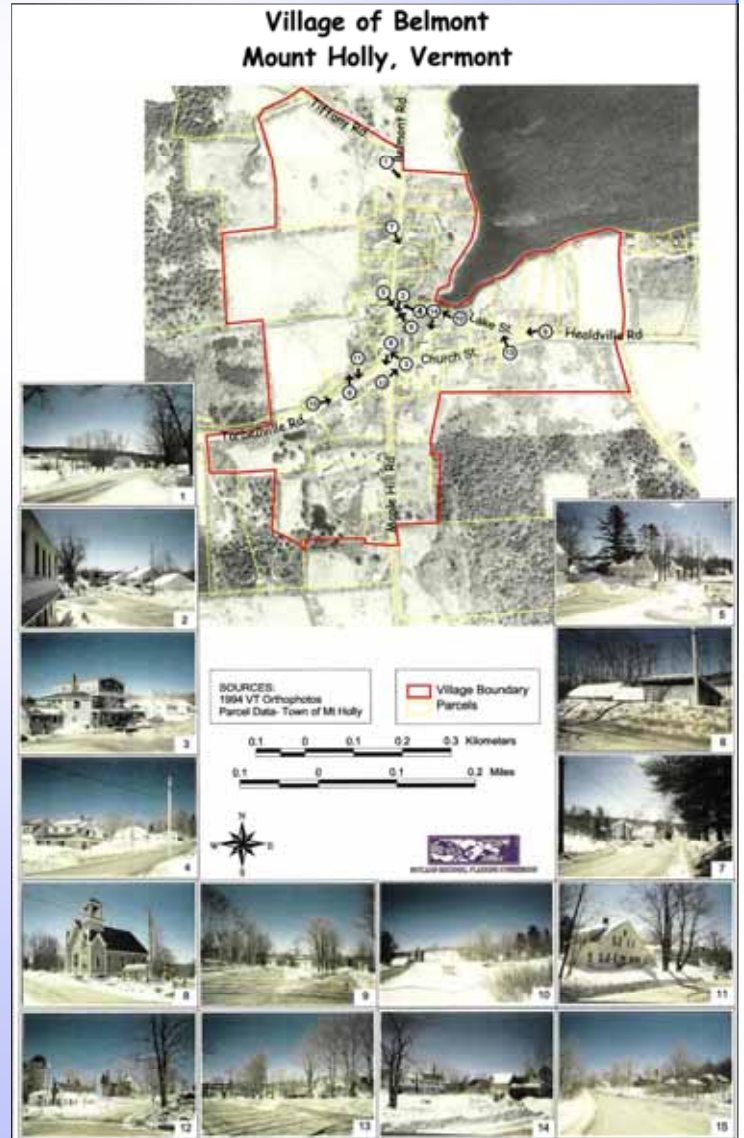
- Establishment of Belmont as a "designed village" under state law, enabling local business owners to receive additional tax credits for rehabilitation of older structures and giving the village area priority status when applying for planning grants.
- Formation of an Affordable Housing Task Force that is working to locate and design units in town.
- Establishment of the Mount Holly Conservation

Trust which has helped landowners to conserve over 150 acres of land for farming, habitat protection, recreation, and forestry.

- Creation of an Historic Barn Preservation Association that has surveyed all historic barns in town, obtained four grants and assistance from volunteer groups to stabilize and repair seven barns.
- Continuance of the annual Photo Contest
- Continuance of a town email events listing, managed by a non-partisan volunteer.
- Greater understanding of how development takes place, and of the town itself, by all those who participated in the planning process.
- Ongoing involvement in the community by the Mt Holly School.

- Gathering of information for the planning commission to create a much stronger town plan with clear goals and policies.
- Emergence of the town newsletter as a vehicle for communicating planning and other local government news with the town and for disseminating surveys for soliciting input from all town residents.
- Continuance of the working group which provides the planning commission with a more informal means for town residents to share ideas.

Mount Holly's example demonstrates that true community participation creates results... even when the end result is not entirely predictable.



Belmont was among the first villages in the Region to receive "Designated Village" status from the Vermont Downtown Board



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Volunteering in Rutland Region communities has become more difficult in recent decades. Reasons include:

- More people work and live in separate places.
- Time is more limited as many families are working multiple jobs to keep their incomes at a level needed to meet rising expenses.
- Culture is more individually-oriented with in-home technology.
- More people move from place to place, without establishing roots
- As the population ages, volunteerism among physically demanding organizations (such as fire departments) is declining.

Voting

As participation in communal activities—such as granges, schools, and others—has declined, it has become more difficult for voters to receive information about candidates and issues at the local level. There is concern that voters are forced to make choices based on limited or no information. Those who have been able to make use of the Internet and other newer forms of communication are able to recoup some of this, but in a more labor intensive and less interactive format.

The challenge is for elected officials and potential candidates to find ways to reach voters in this new reality to ensure that choices being made concerning the future of the community are based on well-reasoned votes and not bits and pieces of the picture, especially around complex issues.

Community Participation

Public input and local decision-making have long been centerpieces of Vermont's democracy. Ideas initiated and acted upon by residents – most of whom are volunteers – form many of the policies and actions that are taken at the town and statewide level.

This type of involvement extends into all forms of public policy, including the planning realm. Input to town plans, land use regulations, and other policies is not only required under state law, but is demanded by the voters, who will otherwise petition and overturn items.

On the surface, the implications of less casual community involvement are fairly small. Infrastructure will continue to be built and maintained, schools will continue to operate, existing employment opportunities will be relatively unaffected—at least for a period of time—held up by their own inertia.

However, when a place begins to lack direction and community spirit—it loses its attractiveness to potential new businesses and residents. In a global marketplace, people and certain types of commerce can be located almost anywhere. In a rural area such as ours, when a community is not energized and focused, it becomes difficult to recruit new employees, new entrepreneurs, and new businesses. It becomes difficult to compete for these essential human and capital resources and a community can slip into becoming stagnant and in need of intensive social services. There are numerous examples of this disinvestment in both urban and rural settings across the country. What it most often takes to turn a place around is community involvement and participation.

Volunteerism

Decline in volunteerism would have a tremendous impact on communities in the Rutland Region. The majority of towns in the Region rely heavily on volunteers for governance, safety, culture, history, and recreation. Innovative ideas and projects at the local or regional level typically cannot be successful without volunteers driving the effort.

Below are a series of generalized impacts of a potentially declining volunteer base—whether for social or demographic (aging of the population) reasons—that have clear and tangible impacts in Rutland Region communities.

- Volunteer fire departments and rescue squads provide essential local services. If the number of volunteers drops below a certain critical level, towns will be forced to look to have paid staff, which will directly impact town budgets.
- Local elected officials are relied upon to set important policy concerning

the future of the town. If positions become filled because only one candidate is running, voters have little choice to exert their power. In some cases, candidates may only run for office because they feel nobody else will do the job, which may have positive results..

- Pressure on a small pool of volunteers in a town to drive multiple programs can lead to burnout and limited time to do effective policy making, programming, or physical work to advance the community.
- Small numbers of volunteers faced with large tasks (updating a town plan, establishing a regional district, administering regulations, providing disaster relief, etc.) are typically unable to complete the job effectively for lack of time or multi-disciplinary approaches to a subject.

FUTURE TRENDS

The most prevalent trends affecting community involvement are the aging of the Region’s population, and our mobility. Both of these trends are likely to become exacerbated in the future before any substantive reversal takes place.

Aging

As the population ages, the number of volunteers available to do work that requires intensive labor (such as firefighting) is reduced. This will become an increasingly important issue.

On the reverse side of the coin, an increased number of retirees will present an opportunity to tap experienced individuals who may have more free time to perform many other volunteer tasks. Organizations served primarily by older volunteers will have to be careful to serve the needs of all of their

constituents, however, not only those represented by the volunteers.

Mobility

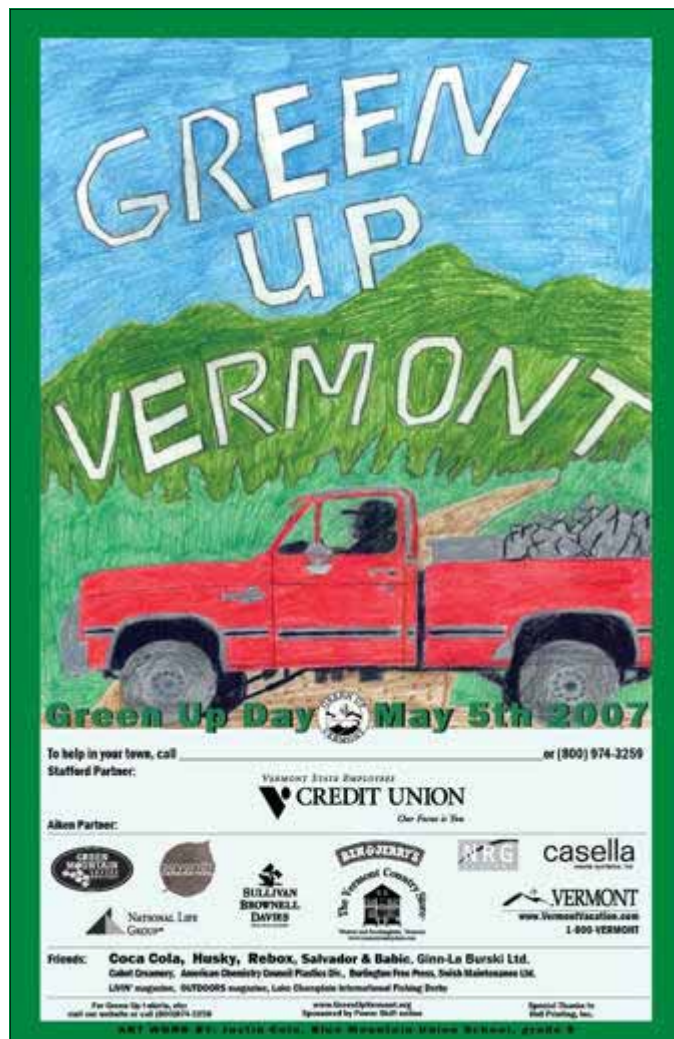
Mobility takes two forms in this Plan. On a day-to-day level, it refers to the increased commuting households have been making between their homes and their place of work or entertainment. In a broader sense, it refers to the movement of individuals and families between places to live. Both of these have increased in recent years, according to the US Census Bureau. It is expected that in the short term, at least, these trends will continue.

Greater distance between home and work (or home and school, or home and



FAST FACT

Turnout at Town Meeting Day fluctuates from year to year in the Rutland Region. From 2001 to 2006, turnout for Australian ballot votes has averaged just under 29% of all registered voters. Turnout during those years, though, has ranged from 24% to nearly 34%.



Green Up Vermont Day has a long tradition of community involvement throughout the State.

www.greenupvermont.org
Winning 2007 Poster by Justin Cole of Orange County

services) means that residents have fewer connections to their community and fewer opportunities for local interaction.

More frequent relocation from town to town, or state to state, means that residents may not develop relationships within the community, and in many cases, never reach a point where they are comfortable serving or speaking for the community. This trend, which is likely to continue with today's more transient younger population, will place greater pressure on historic institutions.

MEETING CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS

The challenges faced by the changing nature of our communities presents a number of opportunities to engage the public in new ways. These include:

- Making use of new media (webpages, web logs, MP3 audio, internet video, email listservs, and others) to provide public information about upcoming events and promote interaction
- Providing new residents to a town with clear and concise information about the events, traditions, and organizations of the community, and inviting them to participate
- Providing voters with clear instructions, easy access to pertinent information, and a sufficient background on the issues being discussed about choices they are to make,
- Developing recreational activities

designed to teach the public about their community (including historic walking tours, regular interactive concerts, etc).

- Providing forums for people with common interest to connect (such as Creative Economy efforts or the Rutland Area Farm and Food Link).

RUTLAND RPC ACTIONS

In addition to supporting activities and developments that contribute to individual communities and the Region, and which help meet the needs identified in this chapter, the Rutland Regional Planning Commission will strive to accomplish the following actions in the coming years:

- Maintain a website that provides essential and informative information about the Rutland Region
- Engage in widespread public outreach and involvement for all planning projects.
- Work with planning commissions to make safe, walkable communities that promote interaction between neighbors through effective town plans and land use regulations.
- Work with developers to built projects that reflect and enhance traditional villages.
- Provide ongoing training about planning and development review to local officials, recognizing the frequent turnover in local volunteers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Vermont Secretary of State — (www.sec.state.vt.us). The Secretary of State's website has information about local, State, and Federal elections, the roles and responsibilities of elected officials, and much more.
- Vermont Planning Information Center — (www.vpic.info). This site contains a wide array of resources intended to be used by volunteer planning commission members, or those interested in community planning.
- Rutland Regional Planning Commission — (www.rutlandrpc.org). This site includes not only information pertinent to the many activities of the RPC, but also contains local plans, zoning regulations, and links to town websites throughout the Region.