

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

Elizabeth Reaves of the UVM Center for Rural Studies (CRS) conducted the following participant interviews in June of 2010, after data was collected.

Steering Committee Interview: Leanne Tingay, State of Vermont Downtown Program Coordinator (VDP): 6/14/10

CRS: What were your goals for participating in this project?

VDP: For me the goal was to be able to show the health of our downtown and what kind of best practices were going to come out of this from the local level and from the state level. At the local level we were asking the Directors of the Downtown Programs (DDP) to do something they had never done before, so chances are they are going to come up with new partnerships, they were going to use the indicators to drive their own work plans and strategic initiatives and maybe even have some ah-hah moments. Then from our standpoint looking at the indicators to say, okay, what kinds of resources should we put together for the support of the Downtown? What can the state do to help encourage DDP's to take initiatives given what the indicators are telling them? Finally, the National Main Street Program (MSP) asks all the state downtown programs to collect statistics that they can use when they are sending their message out to the US congress or other communities. What kind of investment and reinvestment is going on out there? Nationally, indicators have said to us that the MSP as an economic development tool has told us that the MSP has created more jobs per capita nationally than any big box and when you look at the program, it has been the most successful economic development program in the country. We have an opportunity to apply for a place-making grant for a pilot community. MSP is going to pick one pilot community in Vermont. Even though Newport was not one of the test communities in this project, they are starting to collect the same indicator data, because it is important for them to be able to tell their story and we are utilizing it within the grant.

CRS: Talk a little bit about the importance of our downtowns to the health of our communities and some of the planning challenges that downtowns face and how the indicators fit into that.

VDP: Downtowns are the commercial core of our communities. You have the apple, if the core of the apple starts to rot then the rest of the apple rots too. It is absolutely a cause and effect. If we want a strong economy we have to start with the local economy. That doesn't mean we are not trying to get new companies or grow companies in Vermont. They absolutely speak to our quality of life. If someone is going to locate a business in Vermont, after they have looked into all the nuts and bolts, like infrastructure, will they have a workforce? They look at health care, education, and who the up and coming workers will be for the future of their business, and that lovely and intangible thing, "quality of life." That is where the importance of our downtowns comes in. Investors will take a look at the downtown, the business mix, and the economic mix of the downtown. The downtowns need to be healthy because they are going to create jobs and increase quality of life.

The indicators played a role in letting us see everything from crime, housing, and investment into downtowns. We could track the type of housing demand; was it for home owners or renters? If you have a community that is nothing but renters that says you can have shifts in your community at a moment's notice. What kind of second floor development mix? Some of our downtowns are completely full, and some are full on the first floor and not the second and third.

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

So some of these indicators tell us who has development potential in their downtown. Are they full? If so, what kind of rents, business mixes? How many towns have the basics that the local populace is going to utilize? A bank, grocery store, post office that the locals are going to come into town and use and oh by the way do some impulse shopping. A downtown that is nothing but art galleries, gift shops, etc., locals will say oh, this town isn't for me. Locals won't go where the visitors go. What the indicators told us was the inventory of the basics and helped us to see if a town is building for local resident, or as a tourist space.

We looked at much was being invested in the downtowns. How fast is real estate moving? How many of the businesses are locally owned v. franchise? This tells us how locally supported business is. I.e. Montpelier doesn't support franchise. It tells us if you are looking to expand your business what type of market you have.

At the group meeting with some of the downtown directors, housing was the biggest surprise. They didn't really think that there was a demand for upper story home ownership in their downtown. It gave them an opportunity to say, wow, we could actually invest in housing in our downtown. A person who lives in the downtown creates \$15 per square foot of demand in the downtown vs. somebody who is a tenant or employee in a downtown who consumes about \$6 or \$7 a square foot in a downtown. So you can absolutely see what you want is people who own and live in your downtown.

CRS: In terms of downtowns strategic planning around the indicators which ones do you think will be meaningful to them?

VDP: They need to take what they see in the indicators and act on them. Obviously these will be different in each town. Capacity and the market will vary. What type of people want to live in our downtown, and do we have the housing inventory? Are we trying to create a demand for market rate housing in addition to affordable housing? You need a strong economic mix in your downtown. You want to have both.

I was in Brattleboro doing an assessment and talking to a volunteer and he asked me, "Where are the people with means shopping? I know we have people of means here but I don't think they are shopping in the downtown." The other downtowns need to think about these things too.

CRS: One of the interesting anecdotes that has come up as a discussion topic around the housing indicators is that our communities are saying they are seeing too much subsidized housing in the downtown and not enough mix. Therefore the people who can afford to buy and own market rate and above housing are leaving the city.

VDP: Exactly. We need to incentivize different types of home ownership in the downtown. Let's give you a tax break or abatement if you are going to invest in the downtown. Let's say we have a young couple who would like to live in the downtown but can't quite afford it. Let's help support them in their purchase – perhaps a grant to loan program. The indicators get us to think about about the problem and the next step is to look for the carrots and sticks to move us towards solving those problems.

CRS: So, speaking about carrots and sticks, how do you see the Downtown Program or the state encouraging them?

VDP: First of all, our next retreat with our downtown directors is going to be all about indicators. We may not want to ask as many questions as we did in the test communities – as that

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

was about narrowing down the indicators. As a state downtown program we are required to collect indicators to be part of the national main street program – that’s our carrot. I want to teach our downtowns to put these indicators in your annual report to show a return on the dollars invested in the downtown. 80% of our downtowns get some sort of municipal support. The others that don’t get the municipal support have tax assessment districts. We want them to be able to answer, “For every dollar you have given us, what have we given you in return?” We need to show return on investment. We are not a charity we are an investment in the community.

The stick is that we would like to penalize those who don’t collect this information. It is unreasonable to expect that you are going to get 100% participation, but they are useful and necessary for applying for grants.

CRS: How do you say to communities who are thinking about using these indicators “Here is how you use these indicators to take action in your community”?

VDP: I did that when I was a local manager where I didn’t have a choice. You have the ability to apply for all these grants, but if we (the MSP) are going to give you money, you have to give data back to us. We need to measureable outcomes.

I suggest that the organizations give indicator collection out to their committees to break it up. They can turn data into a great report that proves what a good job they’re doing.

Indicators are important for talking to perspective investors and entrepreneurs. They show how a downtown is doing and how much in program and investment can be expected if they locate in the downtown.

CRS: One of the problems with indicator collection is that everything is still done on paper in Vermont and done differently in each town. There is no standardized way that information is collected and recorded. Who gets us to a point where this information is available the way it should be?

VDP: This is where the downtown program needs to advocate change. They need to ask and advocate for this information. I would like to get software for the downtown programs to collect and track this information. The first time is the most painful, but once you get your baseline it is easier to update and track the information. We (the state) can also do the downtown programs the favor of reminding them quarterly to update this information and requiring that they turn it in to us. They don’t need to turn in the yes/no on an annual basis, rather the “did anything change?” information. I want the other indicators quarterly. Indicators can also be a way to motivate volunteers.

CRS: Towns have been collecting these indicators for five years. What outcomes do we see?

VDP: From some, you won’t see anything. In my experience, for some this will just be the thing that they have to do. You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make them drink. What I’m hoping is that I can look at their numbers and we can see if we are tracking any trends and where they may need to focus resources, ask questions, target vacancy rates or infrastructure. Or the opposite could be happening, a town could have a vacancy, everyone is panicking, but that is the first vacancy they have had in the three quarters. You can combat negative press with the indicators too.

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

I also want these indicators to be used to drive work plans and strategic planning. The DP's are required to turn in a budget and a work plan to us every year. Hopefully the indicators and the work plan will line up. Is there anything that is correlating, i.e. economic development program is beefing up, or we are talking to property owners in about investing in housing in the downtown. I am hoping to see some positive and strategic steps being taken by the downtown programs and that the indicators will motivate them to see their purpose and mission as more than planting flowers and putting on events because a lot of these organizations haven't gone beyond that yet.

CRS: Was the participatory process critical?

VDP: Yes, there needed to be buy-in from a number of different people. People have personal or professional reasons for valuing indicators and you don't always get the indicators you want, but by asking and involving the communities you got the buy-in. If you didn't have all the collaborative effort I don't think they would have given it as much consideration.

CRS: Was anything surprising about the data?

VDP: No, it confirmed what I had been hearing. From my standpoint, the data confirmed what we had been discussing and it also helps managers to talk about things like housing that might not be politically correct, but the data allows them to open up the conversation. I was pleasantly surprised by the indicators – they are positive.

CRS: What do you think you learned?

VDP: I learned that there really is a need for the type of housing we are talking about in Vermont. There is demand for living in downtown, but the supply isn't there to meet the need.

The other interesting issue is crime. Since we started looking at the crime information in February and discussing whether or not it was an important indicator, we have seen at least five communities that are dealing with crime issues. Not violent crime, but aggressive behavior, harassing behavior, panhandling, and loitering. We have an issue in our downtowns that is universal. How do we combat that? We need to make sure that the perception that our downtowns are safe becomes the reality.

CRS: Do you think the downtown programs have learned anything from this?

VDP: I think they learned that there are partners out there that they hadn't considered before and have had to pull in as a part of this process. They can use the information to reinforce the message that our downtowns are thriving and need to continue to receive support and attention.

They can use the indicators to open up a larger conversation about why there are certain vacancies – sometimes the same properties are vacant – so what is the problem.

I would like to put this information in a report that we can use and say community by community, "here are the stats and the goal are this, this, and this."

CRS: All the communities want to continue to collect statistics.

VDP: Yes, all the programs and their boards would like to continue to collect data, but always add the qualifier, "this was a lot of work." They say data is great for marketing materials and a great way to talk about our communities. Indicators have been great to help focus our board and our strategic planning. When I ask, "how valuable have the indicators been in actually getting

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

you to take action?”they say that the data is baseline data, that they can’t see trends and take specific and direct planning actions yet, but that it has been important to help tell a better story about their town and to identify where they should focus their attention.

CRS: So indicators are important for measuring outcomes and resource use not just for the downtowns but also the state and MSP, so everyone wins?

VDP: Absolutely, when I get this information I can put it in a report and talk about our communities in the aggregate and to the funders about just how resources are being used. They will be able to see trends in as little as two years. I hope that perhaps every five years there is a broad undertaking where downtowns collect more than just the 25 selected indicators and capture all the indicators. I hope that in five years we will be cutting the ribbon on a project in one of our communities that is a direct result of using and gathering these indicators.

On the local level the most important use has been marketing, telling the story of the town, strategic planning at the board level, setting goals – and in a couple years of data collection the trends will start to emerge and successes will be easier to measure.

Steering Committee Interview: Joss Bess, Vermont Downtown Program Director: 6/14/10

CRS: Goals?

VDP: The question that started this project was ‘how healthy are our downtowns’ and it is an independent question of how are growth centers helping, hurting, or neutral with regard to downtowns. Are we succeeding in our downtown goals? Intuitively I think we are and the anecdotal evidence says so. It would seem that we are, but I can’t put numbers to it. I can’t go to a legislative committee and say look at how well we are succeeding. If we had been collecting the Main Street Program Indicators from the beginning, about jobs, investment etc., the surrogates for the indicators we have developed, I could. My desire would be to collect sales tax data or lease rates which I think most directly reflect the success of the businesses in the downtown, but you can’t get at that information in any reliable way. We will be collecting the Main Street Statistics now. Ideally if you chart the progress of a downtown, the curve looks something like this. In the first 3-8 years the reinvestment is steep. It flattens out after about 10 years after a lot of the low hanging fruit has been taken. So we missed the opportunity to really show the kind of success that we have had if our baseline were different. The indicators are something the organizations can use with the town and the select board, we use at the state level and the main street program can use at the federal level.

It is easier to collect in some cities than other, depending on how large they are and how many resources they have.

CRS: What do you see as the planning challenges for downtowns in the next couple years and how do they integrate with indicators? What sort of strategic planning decisions should our downtowns be taking?

VDP: They need to do what they do better. I always look at the downtowns as a market share; for example, Main Street represents a small percentage of what Vermonters purchase. If Main Street can capture one percent of sales then that is a phenomenal success for them. I think in looking forward, business health and how to run a successful destination oriented business is a

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

huge opportunity and challenge. Continued public reinvestments in infrastructure, sewers, water, roads, all need a lot of attention. Continued occupancy of our downtown buildings as there is still a lot of vacancies in our downtowns. I don't know if first floor vacancy is a huge problem per se, but there can be big holes and chronic vacancies in the downtowns. And the upper floors have a lot of development potential in our downtowns; we need to make that space usable. Continuing to tell the story of why our downtowns are great and why they are important. Not guilt tripping, but why people gravitate to downtowns. I think simply articulating those reasons helps people to choose the downtown over other places to shop.

The indicators have a number of uses. One is for the general public. If you can illustrate that the downtowns are getting better, that is a positive story and people gravitate towards success. More activities, better shopping, more dining, whatever it is that creates a positive buzz does an awful lot. In terms of downtown organization, the most important thing we do is focus on their capacity to put together a strategic plan for their downtown. If they don't have that then they are bumping around without direction from project to project without any broader goal that they are trying to accomplish with partners. Indicators feed into success. Funders like to see and measure success. Volunteers like to feel that they are part of success. Everything feeds and helps them to move forward and get better and get more resources.

I think the indicators have a lot of potential for legislative work.

CRS: Can you speak to which indicators specifically will be useful?

VDP: We would like to get them to the legislature, to show them the benefits. Downtowns and growth centers are getting intertwined. Regarding growth centers, there is no confidence in the decision making of our board so the smart growth organizations were not willing to talk about specific benefits until they were comfortable that the benefits would be directed in the right way. Hopefully, the statute has changed in such a way that they are comfortable with it. There is a parallel discussion that we have on the downtown front. To me downtowns should have access to whatever benefits go to our growth centers. We need to think hard about what would change the development equation. We are trying to lead the development community towards the downtown because it makes sense for them. They need to make money. There is nothing wrong with that. If the downtown is less predictable, more costly, more hassle, then developers aren't going to go there. Can we make changes in our permitting structure, provide tax incentives? In this economic time there is no environment for financial benefits that chip away at state coffers. We may next year receive more money – because tax credits accomplish what they say they do. They create jobs; they create new revenue streams, in particular property tax. Most tax credits deal with economic development and the jobs are portable, but tax credits that get put into a downtown building stay around for a long time. I think the legislature sees that as a good investment. How does that relate to the indicators? If they see successful programs they will invest in them.

CRS: We designed our indicator systems to try to capture the four dimensions of smart growth; it was interesting to see that the economic indicators raised the top in choice of importance. Can we quantify quality of life?

VDP: Livability is equal to satisfaction and that may be how you measure it. I agree that livability is a strong economic development strategy. The kind of businesses that we would like to attract in our communities, the ones that pay well and provide challenging and interesting jobs are going to gravitate to areas that are the most interesting. That would be a very hard thing to

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

capture in a measurable way. A lot of things are necessary to measure but not sufficient alone, arts, walk ability, diversity of shops in the downtown, cultural activities, good services. But you could put all those together and still have a community that has a lousy dynamic. There is the problem of the downtown making up a small percentage of the town and could be doing one thing while the rest of the town is headed in another direction. You would like to think that the downtown can lead, but it is not always going to be the case.

CRS: Do you feel that the process that we used with the communities was effective and important and valuable?

VDP: Yes, you have to field test this stuff if you are going to use it. A lot of good feedback came from the communities on which data sets were available and what was just impossible to collect.

CRS: Did you learn anything? Did anything surprise you?

VDP: One of the things I learned was the interest of the downtown managers in doing this work. It's hard. It took a lot of time. But they felt that it had some real benefit for them.

CRS: Do you feel that the process as it was designed allowed you to give enough input and expertise?

VDP: There probably could have been more. I felt a little detached from the project. I think it would have been more productive to winnow the list down even more before turning the indicators over to the downtown managers.

Maintaining relationships are key to collecting the indicator data and a good outcome of the gathering process. You have to talk to different officials, real estate agencies, and business people and discuss why you are collecting, why it is important and collaborate to get the information.

I'm not sure that we want to make the downtown organizations have to collect the data. I don't think we have any leverage in terms of how the permitting process works and zoning administrators collect and track data.

CRS: Do you think the downtown directors can ask?

VDP: They can certainly ask, but I'm not sure how much success they will have. What we really need is to get our downtown organizations involved in the capital budgeting process. Every municipality is spending money; even small towns are spending \$3-500,000 on investing in capital improvement projects. The downtown organizations with the indicators available to them are in a position to help identify where that money should be directed, but again the indicators are just part of the equation. First the downtown organizations need to ask for a place and build the relationships necessary to give them a place at the table.

CRS: Where do the downtown orgs get their funding?

VDP: Every downtown organization is different; they get their money from a variety of different sources.

CRS: What areas of planning can downtown organizations have a role in influencing?

VDP: Capital budgeting, physical planning, parking, streetscapes. In terms of indicators, I'm not sure if I would make a direct connection between the indicators and the budgeting process,

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

unless you are benchmarking and looking to measure success. Did you look at grand list for any trends in property valuations?

CRS: Yes, in a sense. We asked for real estate demand.

VDP: I think it would tell a good story to look at trends in grand list appraisals for the downtown vs. rest of the town across time. This would be a great indicator of how well our downtowns are doing. A good way to benchmark downtown valuations relative to other valuations.

CRS: How was the downtown program started?

VDP: There was very little discussion about downtowns when we started talking about smart growth and protecting our rural areas. We commissioned a study assessing the economic impact of the downtowns; using that, we went around the state and presented to towns, chambers, etc... about the importance of the downtowns. This got a lot of press in the local papers, the editorial pages started covering this stuff, the downtown program legislation got traction, we got the downtown act passed and it generated a lot of conversation. We got people thinking about their downtowns. Just having that very large public conversation about the downtown as an important entity put value on the downtown. I think we can use the indicators to tell this story.

CRS: What reasons would you give to other downtown programs to encourage them to participate in the indicators?

VDP: I think anything you can do to document success or problems will be helpful.

CRS: How do plan to continue to make these indicators important?

VDP: We want to digest them first before we know how to make them usable.

CRS: How often should they be collected?

VDP: If they are to drive action collection should be more frequent because the indicators show your opportunities or the problems that you need to address quickly. If they are more general, “how are we doing,” collection doesn’t have to be as often.

CRS: What process would you suggest for indicator collection to be integrated into the planning process of the downtown organization?

VDP: The downtown board ought to make clear what each committee is responsible for collecting and how often. It is something that is going to have to be built into the downtown organization’s work plan. One of the challenges we have is getting the downtown organizations to use an aggressive work plan to drive their agenda. I don’t think the managers can do it all, and I don’t think the board can do it all; it needs to be a collaborative and committee driven process.

CRS: Do you think indicators will lead to any sort of action because the downtown organizations don’t have any decision making authority?

VDP: They cannot change the municipal plan, they cannot adapt the budget, they do not maintain the roads, they don’t control the police, but outside of that they have a huge amount of capability to change the dynamic in their downtown. I don’t think that the municipal government has as much if any influence, not that it couldn’t, but I’ve never seen a municipality get involved in economic development or business practice like the downtown organization. They can do marketing and promotions. If my town decided to invest in events I would be upset, but the

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

downtown organization can bring people to the downtown. A lot of their job is to change people's attitudes towards the downtown. In terms of physical stuff, they don't control the planning and zoning, but they are the ones helping people redevelop their properties and can influence planning and zoning based on their experiences with developers. The downtown organization is in a better position to encourage property owners to redevelop. Frankly, I think a lot of towns have not done well with their infrastructure and need an outside entity to prod them to fix their sidewalks, make business areas more accessible, to deal with the parking issues. I will say that a lot of communities have been good at using the transportation fund to improve parking and connectivity. If you look at our downtowns, in the past five years a lot of work has gone into fixing up our streets and infrastructure which is due to pressure from downtown organizations.

Downtown Director Interview: Karen Breshnahan, St. Albans: 6/14/10 (St. A)

St. A.: I think the Indicator process was very valuable, because when you are able to go out to the city of St. Albans and say that we have raised over \$23 million in both public and private over the last six years that is huge. It is probably more than that because when we go through permits they have to pay according to the estimated cost of the project, so I am assuming that the developers didn't want to pay huge permitting fees and therefore were conservative on their estimates. It is hard to capture the total private piece of investment.

We were able to gather this indicator because St. Albans requires the value of the project to be put on the permit. I know that the other towns were not able to because their permit requirements are different. Also, this took time. The permits are filed according to date, so I had to go through by day – not by project or developer – and they are all on paper kept in binders. It's not like they are in a searchable database. I went through all the projects by street and I knew the cutoff on the streets where the downtown boundaries ended. That was cumbersome. I am surprised how little is done digitally in the municipality. I would say technology-wise Vermont lags behind a lot of the other states, especially in the rural communities. I think that this is also the way they have always done it and they don't want to change the way they collect the permits.

CRS: Was it the same person doing most of the investment?

St. A.: No. But there were some developers who did the bigger projects. Some of the names you would see would be the same, but some of the investors were new.

CRS: What were your main goals for collecting this data?

St. A.: My objectives were to have some kind of data to go back to the public, back to investors. Also it provided a way for me to measure how successful or not successful we had been in the last six years. I'm a numbers person by nature so I enjoyed it. We had the inventory we had already completed through our economic committee, so I was able to go through every building, how much sq. footage per floor, total square footage, what it is – commercial, residential, occupied. I had it measured right down to the square foot.

I know a lot of communities do not have that and it probably made it harder to collect the indicators. It is hugely valuable, but you do have to keep up with it. One of the things that made it hard to keep up with in St. Albans was the business permit process. Very often I wouldn't know there had been a change until I was walking down the street. Having some kind of nominal business license would help keep better track of who is coming in and who is not coming in.

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

We had a volunteer collect the sq. footage data for us and he went to every single business owner and took pictures of every building and then he went through all the cards at the listers office and put everything in there. In a bigger town it may be unwieldy to do, but in St. Albans it wasn't bad. What I had wanted to do was take that data and overlay it with the 3D data that we did through the master plan. If they combined those two things together it would be a useful and productive tool for redevelopment and investment in the future.

CRS: Do you feel that most of the goals were met?

St. A: Yes. One thing I noticed was how little data the RPCs have. No inventory of acres of open space, conserved land, farm gain and loss. I ran into an issue in St. Albans where there was a building that was either commercial or residential and I wouldn't know how many units were in there. Where a rehab had been done and a permit had been filed, I would know they were rehabbing five units to six. On some of the buildings it would give sq. footage, but not how many units were in the building. So that would have been one more layer that I would like to have.

CRS: Would there have been a way for you to recommend changes to the permitting process so that you could keep track of this data more easily?

St. A: Absolutely. I think I could get those changes made given the leadership.

CRS: How did you talk to the public and different investors about some of this data?

St. A: Press releases on the initial indicators project relayed the information back to the general public, our volunteers, and our constituency. When I was out talking to people, I would say, oh by the way, I am really excited that we did this project and as a result we learned that \$23 million dollars in public private investment have been made in our downtown. It was great to have that in my tool box when speaking to people, especially when talking to investors. Even when talking to business owners.

CRS: Do you think it was more meaningful to business owners or to general public?

St. A: It was important to everybody. It gave us a way to quantify our success. People would say, "Gee, it looks great up here." But they didn't really know how to put their finger on what was happening. This gave us a way to say "we have data and this is what we found out." The public private investment piece surprised me too. I had to check it twice and I know we probably missed some stuff and that the estimate is conservative. It's too bad that there wasn't a benchmark earlier so we could really track the trend.

CRS: What were other indicators that you liked?

St. A: The employment numbers were tough to ascertain. There are a lot of "mom and pop" operations and we only received 10% back on our employment surveys that we sent out. It was more or less me and the chair of our economic board going through the list of indicators and estimating the number of employees at each business. It probably wasn't as accurate, but we estimated conservatively. I find hesitancy with some of these business owners in talking about how many people they employ.

CRS: Would you say that it is hard to get data at the granular level of the downtown?

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

St. A: Yes, but you need it. It is important to be able to track trends in employment in the downtown because it is another way to gauge if you are creating jobs or not creating jobs and if they are staying or not.

There was such a weird turnover during this time. Watching the businesses leave and tracking who comes in. That was surprising too. There seemed to be a lot of businesses leaving, but as you track the new businesses coming in it wasn't as bad as we thought. The vacancy rate was about 11% which isn't as bad as it could be and there were several businesses that were starting to percolate up. When we started the project there were a lot of businesses leaving and towards the end of the year the businesses were starting to be filled back up. That was exciting. It was a good surprise.

I think all of those numbers are so incredibly important for the downtown, state level and local. As a downtown you really need to know who you are, where your strengths are, where you need to do work, what the challenges are. It is powerful to be able to go to the state and say, look; \$23 million has been invested in the downtown. The program is working; we need more tools and more resources and funding.

CRS: Do you think the participants and volunteers that we engaged in the process – focus group, data collection etc... do you think this was a learning process for them as well?

St. A: Because it was economic development they were all in that arena already, the data confirmed a lot of what they already knew. But there is a huge interest in making St. Albans successful. They were very interested in the data because of the work that they do and they were excited to see the numbers. I think they were surprised by some of the numbers too.

When we looked at the tax returns over the last four or five years, we found that families and middle-income people were leaving the city and being replaced by people who were single or who didn't file tax returns because they were on social service. There was a group of people on the high end in the hill district, but most of the people were on the low end. We have a huge void of families and need to bring more middle income people back to the downtown area.

In the old days they used to call it white flight. But there is such an imbalance now between subsidized housing. You see a lot of that in the downtown because the downtowns are sought after by social service agencies. But it creates an imbalance, especially in the smaller communities where they can't absorb it. In smaller communities it doesn't take long for the imbalance to become obvious. We saw that a lot of people were moving out of the city and into the town. That was leading to a lot of sprawl development and making it harder for downtown businesses to serve people who are not close to you. When we did the market analysis, we found that the town population does not shop in downtown as much as they might be expected to. I think a division happened when the Wal-Mart issue came up; it was viewed publically that the downtown was against Wal-Mart and there was some push back against shopping in the downtown. The division between the town and city governing bodies is stressed and stretched. It is unfortunate, because the two should be developing an economic development strategy together. We should look at the city and the town as one. How do we balance development in the city with development in the town? To be honest that is one of the reasons why the town is not developing and thriving like it has the potential to.

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

CRS: One of the ways we set up the indicators is to make connections between the different dimensions of smart growth. Do you think that worked?

St. A: I think so. Employment numbers showed that the city was an employment center for the county. I think it all came together.

CRS: Another important goal we had was to use participatory methods. Do you think the process was important and valuable and if the indicator process continues do you think it should be implemented as a discursive process?

St. A: I don't think it needs to be implemented in that way. I am speaking purely from my experience in St. Albans. We had a lot of that data collected already through the various projects we were already working on. We used our economic development committee to collect the indicators. The banker on the committee collected those indicators, like the bankruptcy numbers because he knew where those resources were. We had someone who was more into the community and he did the police and public services pieces. There was a huge chunk of it in the municipal plan and in the inventory I had already done. If we didn't have the inventory I wouldn't have been able to get a lot of those statistics, or at least I would not have been as accurate. I think there were a few snags, like the housing, knowing how many units, and trying to gauge what the potential is, what could those buildings really be. That is a good discussion point for the committee and how does that work with the planning that is already happening. Some people would look at those buildings and say that the potential is unlimited. So I guess yes, there is a piece of this where you are looking at the data that there are real opportunities for discussion and creative thinking. But the actual collection is more straight forward. If you don't have the right tools it is difficult. If you don't have a zoning office that collects the right information, those are good pieces to work to integrate into the operations of the municipalities – so that the information is easily available. If you have good data you are able to go to the state and show them where your work and their resources have been effective and where they need help and more resources, but you can't make your case for more resources unless you have something to go to the state with and convey what you have learned.

CRS: What are your recommendations for integrating continued collection and how would you make it part of a yearly agenda?

St. A: My recommendation is that the directors of the downtown organizations meet with their zoning people and provide the leadership into getting the mechanisms built into the process that are not there currently. I think that there has to be some kind of mechanism in place so that how you continue to maintain and update the data in the municipality so that the downtown organization can collect and monitor. It may be a database that everyone has access to in the municipality or that you have to make an appointment and meet with the zoning administrator to get the information. Anyone who doesn't have an inventory should take the time and effort to do it. It takes some time, and it needs to be accessible online. If I could go online and see where the potential for investment and development is in St. Albans in conjunction with a snapshot of "here is what our downtown is, here is the market, here are the services," etc.. that would be a great marketing tool. Also, combining the 3D model with the inventory. Here is the conceptual and then you pull down the data. As a promotional tool, a marketing tool, for tracking investment, I just see all sorts of applications for this especially if it can be integrated with technology.

CRS: How would you use this with your board and community – or would you?

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

St. A: I would use this for strategic planning, marketing, any kind of PR, in the newsletter. Any place or project you are able to draw numbers from is important and can be used to keep the momentum going and as a success story. Use the indicators to tell the story of your town. It is another tool in your toolbox and it is important because most of the other stuff that you get done is not tangible. The indicators give people something to grab onto and focus their energy and attention around.

Downtown Director Interview: Ron Redmond, Burlington, VT (BTV): 6/14/10

BTV: One of the things that is important to remember is that Burlington is a mature downtown. The marketplace was created in 1981. It is unfair to try to make comparisons between Burlington and other downtowns in Vermont, not that it is better or worse, just that it isn't comparable. Our expectations are going to be much different than other downtowns in Vermont.

For example, it is hard for us to have a community event because our audience comes from such a larger area and they are regional.

One of the things that your effort has done is to help us stop and reflect. I think because we are doing so much, it is helpful sometimes for someone to step in and say, 'here is a different way to look at what you are doing.' One of the things we haven't done a good job with is measurements. Back in 2005 we started to measure our customer service and we have data for five years now. We ask them very specific things that help us. Having measures is really helpful. We also have an economic development office that is focused on community development and not economic development. I think that having data that focuses on the economic, livability, etc.. health of the downtown is really important to focus us all.

CRS: What is it that is important to get people to focus on?

BTV: Trends and indicators. Whatever it is you are measuring you need to look at what it means. We hadn't done this until your project, but now we are maintaining a regular spreadsheet on vacancies that we update monthly. So month to month we have some indication to how we are doing.

We have a difficult situation in our downtown in that we have really high fees in the downtown – some of the highest in the country and that has helped Church Street to be successful, but at the same time the fees are unsustainable.

CRS: Would it be safe to say that by having and tracking that vacancy indicator you have a place to focus a strategic planning initiative?

BTV: Yes. It is interesting. So let's go a little bit deeper. We need to have a larger discussion about why certain properties are vacant. Is it that the property owner is difficult? Is the space too large? Is the rent too high? Having the data helps us realize that it isn't just a question about a property being vacant, there may be more to the story. It also tells us that we need to meet with the commercial real estate brokers on a regular basis. We haven't done that. I have a meeting set up with the commercial brokers. I will bring the vacancies to them and be able to explain what we think is going on.

CRS: How else do you see yourself using these indicators and which ones?

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

BTV: The indicators that most interested me were around tenancy. I think it is really healthy for policy makers. In January we spent time with each city council member and talk to them about where the downtown was – the threats, strengths, challenges. I think the indicators can help the policy makers get a more complete picture of the downtown so they can see growth of commercial development and things like that. It will certainly help planning.

CRS: With this project we tried to make connections for people using the indexes to paint a more holistic picture and try create connections for people – do you think the project accomplished that?

BTV: I think that takes time. I don't think that way. Mostly what I do in my job is operations and not around economic development and planning. It was telling that the economic development department wasn't involved in this project.

CRS: In terms of trying to integrate this into your day to day operations – how do you see that becoming part of the operational structure?

BTV: I think where government is going is that it is downsizing. It is always helpful to have stakeholders (like you guys) come to us and give us a tool like this. What we need to continue to do is find those mechanisms that tell us about the health of our downtown. We would probably use our interns to continue to collect the data. We will have to be attentive and stay on this. It is a little bit like the canary in the coal mine. You need to have little early warning systems that tell you what is happening that is negative and what is happening that is positive too.

CRS: What is the best way to pull that together – so that the data is in a place where it is easy to collect, find, search? Who collects it?

BTV: I think that will be different for every downtown. We have a vested interest in maintaining that data here and will continue to collect it. We will certainly share it. If others would like to work with us on it we would welcome it. CEDO tracks a lot of data, but it is different data than what we were collecting.

One of the things the planning department is doing is updating the municipal plan and the first part of that will be to analyze what the development potential is in the downtown in terms of infill and more importantly where can we build up on top. I worry about the city's commercial tax base. In the past ten years 92% of commercial development has occurred outside Burlington. If you look at what has been built in Burlington versus the suburbs it is trending downward and the operating budget for the city continues to increase and is unsustainable, which is a concern.

CRS: Do you think that has to do with the ability to increase residential living in the downtown?

BTV: We have to trust market rate forces. Some of the fears that people have about our downtown are unfounded, that it will become like Santa Barbara or Vancouver. I have to remind people that we are a nice little town, but we are not going to be like Santa Barbara. Service will stay here. Having residences in your downtown – a mix of humans – we need some housing that people want to live in, in the downtown. There are huge opportunities for more residential housing in the downtown. They shop in the downtown, police it, etc.. and right now we have a local ordinance that is a 50/50 rule and that is really hard to maintain. What is nice is that we took a trip recently to Boulder, CO and it was a mix of real estate developers and city council members and local business leaders and they are all pretty close on the issues but they were able to start to understand each other a lot better realizing that they all have a stake.

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

CRS: That relates to one of our intended outcomes, is that there is a discussion process around collection that brings people together. Do you think that if you had been able to follow that process more closely that kind of sharing would have happened?

BTV: I don't think it was necessary because prior to this project we mobilized a very large group of people to do something similar. Not collect indicators, but strategize about the downtown and that has had very positive results in terms of collaboration. We are connected to stakeholders and again, I think if the downtown were younger, but there is so much in place that is already happening in Burlington and we have been processing for a long time.

CRS: You had already set up a similar situation to what we were trying to set up.

BTV: In Burlington there is so much processing, initiatives, participation, so much inclusiveness, that it is exhausting. We are a white board and market culture. There comes a time when you can meet people to death. I am wary of that. This was a project we could just do and the collaboration and discussion had already occurred.

CRS: How do you plan on taking action around the use of indicators?

BTV: That won't be an issue, because now we have something to track. As long as it gets reported and is embraced. Data is only as good as what you decide to do with it, so I guess we will see. We are going to continue to track this data and we will be tracking things that other departments aren't and that is good.

CRS: Do you think it is important to be able to compare one downtown's data to another downtown?

BTV: Yes, it allows towns to share success and how they get there and how they tackle similar challenges.

CRS: We talked a lot about vacancy rates and retail and commercial space, but what other indicators stand out to you as important indicators to track and look for trends in over time?

BTV: I think having the list of indicators is important, even if you don't track all of them. Like obesity rates. Harder to keep track of, but having it front you, even without a number, gets you thinking about the bike path. Number of farmers markets, court house, etc., is all important to the health of your downtown.

CRS: This town profile data is secondary data that is available at the town level, not at the downtown level.

BTV: Do I know how to get this next year? We will do it if you tell us how or if someone could provide this easily.

Restaurants with local food agreements is a tough one to get. We are thinking about creating our own local foods logo and certification. Yeah, see this is good stuff. Even knowing the number of coffee shops in your downtown is really good. We are going to update an inventory of all the business types in our downtown.

We started the inventory in 2005 because people were feeling bummed out about the marketplace and we collected this data to show them the richness of retail that existed in our downtown and they saw that we weren't as bad off as we thought. I say that because I believe the

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

indicator data can be a real motivator for people to see success or to see what they have that is good as much as they can see where their weaknesses are.

Downtown Director Interview: Carol Wells, Bristol, VT (BRS): 6/21/10

BRS: The value of public private investment was really hard to get.

CRS: Yes, we are creating a list of recommended changes for the permitting process so that zoning offices are collecting the necessary information. We are confident, as are other directors that this would be a reasonable request.

BRS: I wouldn't have a problem asking either. I have a good relationship with the office and they were helpful when I was trying to collect not just this indicator, but other data as well. As long as you are explaining to developers why you are asking for the information and making it clear to them that they won't be penalized for providing it. I say that because people tend to be suspect about having to provide this information. They may think that the cost or the estimate of the cost will come back to haunt them. Is it going to cost me more in taxes? Also, they are going to underestimate the cost because they get taxed on the value.

CRS: What were your goals and do you feel that they were accomplished?

BRS: I think my goals were to get a better sense of all the aspects and factors that contribute to creating a healthy downtown. I was aware of some, but there were others that I wouldn't have thought of. I saw this as an opportunity to be involved in a pilot project with Smart Growth Vermont. I also saw this as a way to get data that would be helpful for applying for grant money, and I was hoping that it would get my board members involved in the process.

All those goals were accomplished, except for getting the board members involved. Some were good. I would give them a question or two and they would go out and find it. Some would simply just say they couldn't find the information. Others would send me a link to a website that had the information on it somewhere, but I had to go searching for it. I wanted them to do the research, not just give me the answer.

CRS: Why do you think they weren't as engaged as you hoped?

BRS: Probably because they didn't see the big picture. I would update them at our meetings and try to explain to them why it is important. Maybe, some people just didn't enjoy it. It might have been a personality thing. I gave the real estate indicators to the realtor, bank stuff to the banker, I figured that they would like to get this information and know where to find it, but it wasn't something that they took initiative on. I had to constantly remind them.

CRS: Part of the process for us was to create collaboration and discussion around the health of the downtown and collection. Do you feel like that was important to the process?

BRS: It was important, but not essential. Having the focus groups was good, because they were opportunities for me to invite people who weren't really involved or who I wanted to engage more to collaborate on downtown issues. When we pulled them back together again a year later at the end it was informative and several of the people said, "I really enjoyed that."

CRS: Were you strategic in your thinking when you were inviting people? Were there particular stakeholders you made sure to invite?

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

BRS: I invited them, but they didn't all show up.

CRS: Like who?

BRS: There was a particular property owner I wanted to get on board. He came to the first one, but was out of town for the second one, so unfortunately it hasn't really engaged him. I think I was working for different ages, trying to involve some of the younger business owners, people who were not actively involved with us, who I wanted to get involved. I thought it would be a good way to connect them with what we do. I think we had marginal success engaging these people, but there were no hallelujah moments.

CRS: What was it about the project that made you think that this would spur them to more involvement?

BRS: Everyone likes to be asked for their opinion and some of these people were very vocal about what they saw as important downtown issues. I thought this would be a good way to focus some of that energy and a good venue for them to express their opinions in a constructive way. I also wanted people who had been here a long time and would have a lot of institutional memory.

CRS: Have you used the data in any way yet?

BRS: Not yet, but I haven't had time to write a grant yet. I would like to see what changes. It is good to have this baseline to use as a benchmark. I would love to have had this data from ten years ago, so that we can see how the mix of housing, vacancy rates, ownership have shifted. You try to do it from memory and you get a really inaccurate story. The indicators will capture moments in time because you can't rely on memory and it will be good to have this information moving forward.

CRS: Have you discussed the indicators in meetings or used them in strategic planning?

BRS: I gave the final report out to people. Some were interested and some were not. We have just had other things we were focusing on, like developing a brand for Bristol.

CRS: In our post-focus group there was a lot of emphasis on using the data as a marketing tool. Do you see that happening or tying it into the branding?

BRS: I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. I could see us doing that.

CRS: How do you plan to integrate continued collection and use of these as part of your organizations practices?

BRS: I would like to collect data every two years. Every year would be a little too much. I would like to work with zoning to update the permit process so the data is easier to collect. I would like to put it on a spreadsheet to see how things change every two year. Also, to use it. Things like the number of families and how that is changing and shifting could inform our economic development and the businesses we are trying to recruit.

CRS: Any ideas – I would be happy to hear what others are doing?

BRS: Because we were the smallest of the towns that participated in this, a lot of this stuff wasn't a mystery. I mean you can stand in the middle of Main Street and count your businesses and vacancies. I think there might be more revelations for a larger town than for us. A lot of my

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

suspicions were confirmed. There were some surprises, but I can't remember what they were right now.

I think the biggest thing for me was all the different factors that go into making a vibrant downtown.

CRS: Can you give specific examples?

BRS: Looking at all the different factors that you were asking for, such as the amount of open space, the housing mix, owner vs. the rental, I guess in some sense I realized that it was important to downtown health, but it is also part of a much broader picture. Looking to see if you have a school, grocery store, bank, post office. It is good to have that list to remind yourself. The density of housing units. A lot of stuff we know. Like we know we need more starter ender housing units and we have land picked out, but we can't find a developer. We need to create a brochure for recruiting business to Bristol and this information will come in handy to do that.

CRS: Do you think the connections you are referring to between the importance of a good mix of housing or open space and the health of the downtown spilled over to your board or other community members who have been involved in the project?

BRS: People were interested in it, like the town administrator who helped me to get some of the stats and he pointed out the permit problems in trying to find public and private investment numbers. The police chief was helpful too. Whether it has really impacted how they think about the downtown? I doubt it.

CRS: Do you have any intentions to be more public with the data? Talk about them to the town residents or constituency?

BRS: Yes, I plan on doing a newsletter to everyone this summer and will use this as a talking point.

CRS: The process we designed was call CPAR and involves steering committee experts and the community so that their input allow discussion to happen around the process. Did that work well? Did you have enough input?

BRS: I had input and the process worked well.

CRS: Would there be anything you would change?

BRS: Make the collection more manageable. Finding the time to collect that data was the most challenging. I originally thought I would divide the work up between board and committee members, but that didn't work and I ended up doing most of it myself. Sometimes I just didn't know where to go to find the data. Some of it was easy because it was a small town and I could just count. Trying to fit it into everything else the downtown org does is challenging.

CRS: Do you think it is important to compare data across towns?

BRS: I think it is, but there is also a danger there. You need to compare towns of similar sizes. It is irrelevant for us to compare ourselves to Burlington. There is no standard there of similarity. If you can compare yourself to similar towns it gives you an idea if you are on track. If you are doing something well you can think about why you are successful and if another town is doing something better you can ask them what strategies they are using to achieve that. Each town is individual and the communities are unique. You can use data as a tool, but you certainly can't

Indicators of Downtown Health – Participant Interviews

make statements about success without qualifying the data. Just because one town has a higher ownership rate, doesn't mean it is doing better. I think it is interesting information but shouldn't be used to rank downtowns. Another thing that would be nice is to create some standards. The purpose was to assess what it means to have a healthy downtown. Take vacancy rates. What is a healthy vacancy rate? If you have one over something are you in trouble? It would be good to have some value placed on some of these indicators because otherwise they are just there in a vacuum. We have 300 parking spaces in our downtown. Is that a good number for our size? I just don't know. Maybe some of these indicators help you do that, like net and gain of all jobs. You need to put that in perspective. What is it nationally? What is good for Vermont?

CRS: If hypothetically a growth center was proposed on the outskirts of town, or I know that there is a planning process going on in town right now – do you feel that these indicators give you the ability to respond to how planning decisions get made?

BRS: Our planning process is so hung up on a single issue right now that we will never get beyond that one topic. I haven't used it yet in that regard. There might be some pieces that we could use but I haven't thought about it in that way. We would like to do another survey, or the town would, and there might be some of the indicator data we could use in that way.

CRS: What reasons would you give other downtown programs to do this? Or would you?

BRS: I think it would be easier for them since they will have fewer indicators to collect than we did. It is good information to have. More uses for the information will evolve and become apparent as time goes on. It is valuable to broaden the perspective. You can get too focused on the day to day and stepping back and looking at the bigger picture is important. It would be good if you could make suggestions for use in the manual.

CRS: Should this continue to be done at the committee level or by the director only?

BRS: I think it is important to have the committee do it because they can become more involved.

CRS: Anything you want to add?

BRS: Collecting these indicators helps you get ahead of the game. Do it once and establish a baseline and then continue to collect frequently and you start to see things shifting, such as vacancies or the housing market, and maybe the warning signs will show themselves in some of these indicators before something becomes a really obvious problem. It should be able to give you a leg up on problems as they are coming down the road. It can also show the results of investment and how important the investment is in the downtown. It can underscore and celebrate positive trends. You know it will be interesting to see how this evolves over the years.