



Northwestern Connecticut Regional Planning Collaborative *Village Center Vitality Program*

Village Center Vitality Strategies

Town Specific & Regional Strategies for the NW Corner of CT

As of **September 30, 2010***

*We expect these strategies to evolve as we continue to seek input from stakeholders.

These strategies were developed including community input from:

- an **online survey** that was conducted (May-July 2010),
- **focus group sessions** for business & town leaders (April 19th & 20th),

These findings are summarized in our “**Current Conditions**” report available on our website www.nwctplanning.org.



Strategies For All Towns

These are strategies that each individual town can take advantage of on their own.

Short-Term Strategies

#1 Designate a Single-Point of Contact to Welcome Businesses

Could be First Selectman or appointee

- This person should be easily accessible by having, for example, regular office hours at town hall
- This role should be explained to all Town Hall staff and advertized to realtors & the business community

Responsibilities would include:

- Assist new or potential business owners to understand the town's permitting requirements and process.
- Take note of any regulatory barriers to the success or creation of new or expanding businesses and make recommendations to appropriate Town Board (s) to address and remove these barriers.
- Refer new business owners to VCV Leadership Council, SCORE, or other local organizations that can help with understanding the business climate and available services in their respective towns.

Short-Term Strategies

#2 Offer Façade Improvement Loans to spur reinvestment in businesses

- Loans to improve or refresh building exterior or façade
- Program could provide interest-free financing for improvements up to a specified amount (ex. \$25,000)
- Program could be revolving, with repayments sustaining the funds for façade improvements
- Program could provide loan forgiveness at a rate of 10% per year over 10-year period subject to the improvements remaining in place
- STEAP grants have been used for similar programs in Canaan and Cornwall. LHCEO used "Urban Action" funding and provided rebates rather than loans.

#3 Provide Tax Deferments to encourage new/expanded businesses on Main St.

- The Town of North Canaan successfully utilized tax deferments to encourage rehabilitation and construction of commercial properties in a designated area in the 1990s
- The program deferred increases in property assessments that would have ordinarily resulted from improving a business through rehabilitation or construction; tax increments phased-in over 5 years. Other communities have implemented similar deferments over a 10-year period.



Strategies For All Towns

Long-Term Strategies

#1 Partner with local Land Trust to preserve green gateways to the Village Center

Purpose and Need

- The character of our village centers is linked to the quality of the green gateways residents and visitors drive through when entering them.
- Rural New England towns are characterized by compact walkable village centers with more dense commercial and residential development surrounded by large stretches of farms and forested lands
- Commercial strips outside of the traditional village centers erode the rural character of the town and drain the village centers of the critical mass of businesses they need to remain vital.

Implementation

- Meet with the local land trusts to identify gateway areas that need to be preserved and the resources needed to preserve them.
- Litchfield Hills Greenprint and the Collaborative can assist these local efforts.



Long-Term Strategies

#2 Create Affordable Housing

Purpose and Need

- The high cost of housing throughout the 8-town region (with the exception of North Canaan) is making it increasingly more difficult for the children of residents to remain in the area and to recruit and retain younger emergency service volunteers.
- In addition, the high cost of housing is a deterrent to attracting new businesses to the area, and to house employees of local businesses and institutions

Implementation

- Conduct a local housing needs assessment to demonstrate the gap between what local teachers, employees, and emergency service volunteers are earning and housing costs. (The Collaborative staff can facilitate this for you.)
- Target strategies to provide housing to the specific constituents and incomes identified in the assessment
- Consider creating a “housing fund” line item in the town budget to assist with the implementation of housing strategies. (Cornwall & Salisbury are considering this now)



Regional Strategies

These are strategies towns in the region would all contribute to & work on cooperatively.

Short-Term Strategies

#1 Form Regional VCV Leadership Council

Composition: A small group of community leaders who are active in the NW corner- bankers, realtors, major employers (Sharon Hospital, Geer), retired executives.

Responsibilities:

- **Fundraising-** Working with Collaborative staff to identify and pursue sources of funding to implement Village Center Vitality strategies.
- **Facilitating-** work with realtors, property owners, and town leaders to remove barriers to filling vacancies.
- **Networking-** are there local businesses who want to expand, who could fill empty storefronts?
- **Advising** potential new business owners on current market conditions.

Short-Term Strategies

#2 Participate in Regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)

Purpose and Need

- Over the long-term, increasing the number and types of jobs in the region will help younger residents and attract new employees and their families, increasing demand for retail goods and commercial services in the village centers
- NWCT CEDS update process could identify the types of businesses that would succeed and generate the highest economic benefit to the town and the region
- The CEDS region could become an EDD the projects identified in the CEDS could then qualify for federal EDD funding.

Identify Sites for New Businesses & New Jobs

- Each town should identify at least one site or area that could accommodate business expansion and bring them to the CEDS committee.
- Through the CEDS plan process these sites could be analyzed to identify the of highest and best uses for the site based on job generation, pay scale, educational levels, etc.
- Building on assets: the region is already a leader in health care, education and specialty manufacturing. The CEDS should consider the ability of these industries to attract similar uses, associated and/or supporting industries

Identify CEOs and senior managers who currently live in the area as a way to stimulate interest in opening businesses

- Market the Region's Quality of Life: Residents live here or choose to move here because of the region's quality of life, its natural beauty, recreational opportunities. These factors could provide a marketing tool for attracting new businesses



Regional Strategies

Short-Term Strategies

#3 Encourage Local Marketing Cooperation

Coordinate collaborative marketing efforts among like kinds of businesses

Requires a single point of contact, such as a Chamber of Commerce (example: Kent Chamber of Commerce)

Look for local co-marketing opportunities based on proximity, road network, village character, and shared assets. Examples:

- Salisbury, Sharon and Kent: arts and culture
- Cornwall, Canaan and Salisbury: outdoor recreation

Co-marketing may not be appropriate for all towns

- North Canaan more family oriented
- Norfolk's music venues serve the region and have larger trade area

Town web sites need to be updated and an integral part of the marketing program

Short-Term Strategies

#4 Create Village Improvement Districts

Purpose and Need

- Dedicate property tax revenues for public improvements in the village center

Implementation

- Could be co-terminus with districts designated for tax deferments and façade improvements
- Dedicate a small portion of property taxes to be set aside for public capital improvements such as sidewalks, lighting, signage, etc.
- Alternatively, there could be a small surcharge on properties within the district to fund similar improvements
- Could function like a Tax Increment Financing District (TIF) which allows reallocation of property tax revenues (does not impose a new tax) such that future growth in property tax revenues are used to finance debt incurred for property acquisition, condemnation, infrastructure improvements, etc.



Regional Strategies

Long-Term Strategies

#1 Hire Community & Economic Development Coordinator for the NW Corner

Description:

- An economic development staff person providing support for up to six northwest corner towns to implement regional and town specific strategies.

Responsibilities:

- Support first selectmen as single point of contact for welcoming new businesses
- Support/staff Regional VCV Leadership Council
- Work with existing Chambers of Commerce, merchant groups and business associations to carry out regional marketing and identify opportunities for local marketing cooperation
- Coordinate study of costs/benefits of regional branding and regional wayfinding system

Long-Term Strategies

#2 Create NWCT Brand & Marketing Strategy

Regional Co-marketing

- Regional event marketing would promote destinations and attractions in all towns
- Develop an annual regional multi-media marketing program that would capture the wide variety of events, destinations and attractions in the region
- Establish and maintain a regional web site with links to Chambers of Commerce, categories of businesses (food, lodging, etc.), arts council and specific sites, sports venues, other regional websites

Common Regional Way-finding Signage & Informational Kiosks

- Once a visitor crosses into the NW corner, a kiosk in each town could direct them to services and attractions in that town and in the region. The kiosks and signage would reinforce the brand/identity of the corner.

Next Step: Do cost/benefit analysis study of branding the NW Corner.



Regional Strategies

Long-Term Strategies

#3 Facilitate the development of sustainable natural resource based industry:

Forest-to-Furniture/Farm-to-Table

Purpose and Need

- Integrate economic development with natural physical assets of the region
- Create a wide range of job opportunities
- Generate substantial direct and indirect economic benefits
- Attract new residents with a wide range of skills, experience and educational background, increase demand for goods & services in village centers.

Focus primarily on:

- Forest and lumber products
- Agriculture and livestock products
- Coordinate existing industries and attract entrepreneurs to complete the supply, processing and delivery of products

Possible Implementation Step

Organize a workshop of sustainability experts from government and non-profit groups such as the CT Dept. of Environmental Protection, the Yale School of Forestry or Paul Smith's College, along with regional furniture and cabinet makers to discuss the development of a forest-to-furniture business plan.

Long-Term Strategies



Zoning Strategies for All Towns

Short-Term Strategies

- #1 Evaluate and **revise signage standards** to
 - encourage coordinated signage and enhance commercial visibility and way finding, e.g.,
 - allow offsite signs with property owner's permission,
 - allow temporary sandwich board signs for limited number of days per month (if not allowed now)
- #2 **Revise parking standards** to
 - provide site- and use-specific flexibility
 - encourage shared parking
- #3 Establish, or simplify and clarify where appropriate, **home business regulations** and permitting requirements for **village area zones**
- #4 **Allow accessory apartments in business buildings** by right with site plan approval of parking and maximum residential area
- #5 Revise lot dimensional standards to **permit higher density where appropriate** for commercial use or redevelopment

Long-Term Strategies

- #1 Consider establishing **design guidelines** to facilitate new development while sustaining historic value in **village area zones**
 - Identify areas of historic value in **village area zones** for development with preservation
 - Delineate appropriate boundaries
 - **Create design guidelines to ensure compatibility of new development** and redevelopment
- #2 Create regulatory **incentives for mixed uses** in village area zones
 - Dimensional standards
 - Shared parking
 - Streamlined permitting
- #3 **Integrate** open space, landscaping, and other **green infrastructure concepts** into development standards to enhance environmental and aesthetic value of village areas
- #4 Create regulatory **incentives for enhanced pedestrian access**

Note: A **specific analysis of your town's zoning regulations** has been completed . Specific recommendations for your town will be given to your Planning & Zoning Commission.



Long-Term Strategies

- Use public funds to improve the gateway to Main St. from the north
 - May require capital improvements and/or public investments (grants or loans) to improve lighting and signage in vicinity of Kent Green and Fife & Drum
 - Town should make capital improvements necessary to extend the quality of the pedestrian environment north of the RR crossing

- Build on current tenant mix which primarily serves local residents (Town Hall, Post Office, IGA, hardware store, fast-food take-out)
- Town should utilize property tax incentives to encourage development on the Kent Green site
- Regional VCV Council could work with property owner to determine highest and best use for vacant buildings
- Participate in the Chamber’s ongoing joint marketing program to promote the “local” goods and services
- “Green” Kent Green: promote energy efficiency as a brand for Kent Green, i.e., installation of solar, etc.
- Consider moving library to Kent Green



- Regional VCV Leadership Council or CEDS could help determine highest and best use of the site
- Engage property owner in discussions to redevelop or sell the site
- Get the real facts on haz mat conditions; identify who pays for this study and a funding source
- Prepare a business plan for the site to test financial feasibility
- Work with R.E. brokers to market the site for the highest and best use

- The current tenant mix (primarily office-commercial) results in a significant break in the retail character of Main Street
- Prepare a business plan to test the financial viability of re-tenanting the Station
- Engage property owner in discussions to change the tenant mix
- Work w R.E. brokers to find suitable no-cost alternatives for current office tenants as leases expire



Cornwall

Short-Term Strategies

Brand and Market Cornwall Bridge as “Home Design Center”

- Existing concentration of home improvement stores provide an excellent mix of home improvement products and services: lumber, hardware, paints, kitchen design, carpets/rugs, tiles/counter tops, framer, antiques, plumbing/ heating
- Redesign parking lot, curb cuts, pedestrian flow, signage, lighting to make the group of stores work as a single shopping destination
- Institute common operating hours
- Emphasize safe pedestrian link to General Store which would provide food, drink, refreshments
- Improve/add crosswalks and signage to facilitate safe pedestrian movement between stores and the green
- Redesign green for pedestrians, gathering place, events
- Use public sector funds for highway improvements, curb cuts, crosswalks, street lighting, traffic signals
- Merchants would fund parking lot and onsite pedestrian improvements, signage, etc. with the aid of tax incentives

Retain West Cornwall village core for commercial

- Limited space in the core or West Cornwall will make it difficult to build a critical mass
- Essential to preserve as much commercial space as possible



Short-Term Strategies

Capitalize on business assets and natural features to make West Cornwall a destination for outdoor activities

- Proximity of Clarke Outdoor, Housatonic River and Mohawk Mountain make West Cornwall a convenient destination for hikers, fishermen, kayakers, & skiers
- Marketing of Covered Bridge should be tied-in to destination for “outdoor” enthusiasts
- Improve way-finding to existing trails
- Increase access to river

West Cornwall could be a key participant in the agri-tourism concept

- Link Ian Ingersol to regional agri-tourism marketing
- Build a critical mass by focusing emerging businesses on hand-crafted furniture, antiques, pottery, arts and crafts

Long-Term Strategies

Increase Parking in West Cornwall

- Businesses in village core suffer from a lack of convenient parking
 - Look for opportunities to acquire land for additional municipal parking

Identify Bed & Breakfast opportunity in West Cornwall

Sharon

Short-Term Strategies

Link Tri-Arts Playhouse to village center

- Capture some of the 9,000 annual visitors to the playhouse by creating a pedestrian friendly link to downtown and village green
 - Will require a design study

Market dinner opportunities to Tri-Arts

Customers

- Create a dinner option at the playhouse site
 - Picnic dinners catered by Jams or other local restaurants or by hospital caterer
 - Erect temporary tent onsite to insure continuity of food service in inclement weather

Beautify the Sharon Shopping Center

- New facades, signage, landscaping in parking lot
- Could be partially funded through tax incentives such as façade improvement program and/or tax deferment for incremental value

Improve way-finding to West Main businesses

Improve gateway from north on Rt. 41

- Entrance to village center needs stronger identity
- Improved lighting and landscaping implemented through public-private collaboration (town funds, garden club)

Long-Term Strategies

Permit ground floor commercial use in buildings around the green

- Improve the balance of commercial, institutional and open space uses around the village green
- Focus new uses on B&Bs, restaurants, antiques; could be mixed-use with residential above

Capitalize on concentration of healthcare providers and services

- Identify locations for light industry associated with healthcare, such as commercial laundry, labs, catering
- Identify locations for additional service providers

Increase affordable housing opportunities for employees in local businesses



Salisbury

Short-Term Strategies

Continue working to create a more interesting pedestrian experience in Salisbury by:

- Improve the design, lighting and landscaping in the alley connecting Main St. to LaBonne's
- Improve the gathering place outside The Roast & LaBonne's
- Carry the pedestrian link to the Marketplace building (Thornhill Florist, etc.) and link to Academy St.

Continue working to improve pedestrian access along Academy St.

- Improve/install sidewalks; add street lighting; limit on-street parking

Promote beneficial business practices

- Investigate potential to install temporary businesses in vacant and seasonal storefronts
- Help arrange common business hours
- Market stores to younger demographic by incorporating outdoor recreational opportunities, such as Ski Jump, ice skating, lake (opening of Village Store should help)
- Keep Salisbury web site updated

Brand and market Lakeville as arts & cultural destination

- Expand use of Gallery Nights (or Days)
- Promote local artists
- Encourage opening of additional galleries
- Link marketing to restaurants, inns and private schools in Lakeville (lectures, exhibits)
- Coordinate events with NWCT Arts Council

Short-Term Strategies

Identify highest and best use of Firehouse

- Town controls Firehouse property and has opportunity to determine use of a highly visible property, setting the tone for the revitalization of village core
- Regional Council and CEDS could help plan the reuse of the Firehouse, integrating R.E. brokers in process
- Lease rather than sell property at this stage to better control reuse and provide flexibility in attracting tenants

Long-Term Strategies

Plan the development of the vacant property south of Chaiwalla on Rt. 44/41

- Vacant property interrupts pedestrian experience between Town Hall and the White Hart
- Town should engage owner in discussions about development or sale of the property
- Mixed-use opportunity, ground floor commercial, install sidewalks, reconfigure diagonal parking

Encourage commercial redevelopment along Railroad St. east of LaBonne's parking lot

- Potential to tie these sites into Marketplace
- Create space for commercial growth



North Canaan

Short-Term Strategies

- **Brand and market the village as family friendly**
 - Capitalize and expand on town's younger demographic and affordable housing stock
 - Town should be pro-active in retaining existing businesses already aimed at younger market (hobby shop, coin store, sporting goods, pet store, movie theater, railroad museum, fast food, etc.)
 - Could be implemented through an audience-specific marketing program funded by a joint venture of the Town and local businesses
 - VCV Leadership Council could identify the highest and best uses to fill the vacant stores (see below)
- **Reinstitute tax incentives for business expansions and improvements**
 - Tax deferments, façade improvement loans
- **Investigate the legality of financial disincentives for long-term vacancies**
 - Penalize long-term vacancies created by greater-than-market asking rents
 - Town would need legal advice

Short-Term Strategies

- **Make Canaan Union Station the hub of commercial revitalization**
 - Highly visible and symbolic structure could jump-start revitalization with inclusion of family-oriented restaurant, museum and railroad memorabilia
 - Assure that station renovation includes visible and protected outdoor space to serve as a public gathering place
 - Successful start will require immediate marketing program (possibly funded through existing station grant)
- **Improve pedestrian experience in the village center**
 - Continue and extend urban design and sidewalk improvements from village center to Lindell's
 - Install crosswalks between station and library
 - Improve railroad crossing on Rt. 7
 - Relocate utility poles behind buildings, as planned
 - Re-assess urban design plan to provide space for trees; alternatively planters should be provided as part of street lighting



North Canaan

Short-Term Strategies

- Improve gateway to village center on Rt. 7 from the north
 - Re-tenanting of vacancies on Rt. 7 north of Rt. 44 intersection is key to revitalizing the image of the village center
- Focus on family friendly retail
 - Integrate R.E. brokers in the selection and solicitation of new family-oriented businesses
 - Restaurants with a mix of price points including upscale, family, full-service; coffee shop
 - Children's and/or family clothing and shoe stores
 - Jewelry and accessories store merchandised for teens and generally younger market
 - Bookstore
 - Florist
 - Ice cream/sandwich shop



Long-Term Strategies

- Re-establish regular weekend tourist trains originating from Canaan Union Station
 - Town should develop a business plan with owner of railroad to determine capital and operating costs and economic benefits to the Town and the region
 - If the operation is financially feasible and economic benefits are significant, Town should work with owner to identify financing, and interface with public agencies to secure necessary approvals
- Support the establishment of commuter rail service between Danbury and North Canaan
 - Town should review operating plan to identify potential environmental issues (traffic, parking, pedestrian flow, etc.)
 - Commuter service would boost retail sales in the downtown area



Falls Village

Short-Term Strategies

- Promote village center as gathering place for outdoor enthusiasts
 - Town should co-market with inn and café to create image of a gathering place for hikers, cyclists, canoeists, bikers, etc.
- Improve way-finding from village center to river, falls and hiking trails
 - Improve and facilitate pedestrian movement in village center
 - Capitalize on town's historic district designation
 - Expand use of historic markers and interpretive signs
 - Improve picnic area near bridge and power plant
- Focus retail growth on convenience goods and tourist destinations
 - CEDS could identify highest and best use of vacant stores
 - Integrate R.E. brokers in the selection and solicitation of new businesses



Long-Term Strategies

- Coordinate with Housatonic Valley Railroad to use Falls Village Depot for passenger/tourist traffic
 - Town and businesses should co-market with HVRR
 - Tie-in tourist train with new Falls Village Inn and Toy Makers Cafe
- Establish a specialty/historic car museum
 - Spin-off from auto events at Lime Rock Race Track and Jacobs Garage
 - Solicit operator and support from Skip Barber and other aficionados of motor sports
 - identify a suitable location in village center for rotating car shows and exhibits
 - Town could help fund the preparation of a business plan



Norfolk

Short-Term Strategies

- **Re-merchandise Norfolk Corner Store**
 - Adjust product lines to service convenience needs of residents
 - Adjust décor to serve as a comfortable gathering place for local residents as well as visitors to Infinity Hall and other music venues



- **Increase visits to the village center by area residents and tourists alike**
 - Share the market, maximize the resource: improve coordination of regional marketing with programs at Infinity Hall, Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, Yale School of Music and other events in the Town of Norfolk

Long-Term Strategies

- **Integrate Norfolk's major music venues into branding of the NW Corner**
 - Expand marketing efforts by Infinity Hall, Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, Yale School of Music and the Town to include more of the resources of the NW Corner
 - Integrate Norfolk's cultural calendar with regional lodging packages and opportunities for restaurant, gallery, and shopping packages to extend weekend stays



Goshen

Short-Term Strategies

Re-establish Goshen's Village Market as small supermarket or specialty grocer

- Continue/re-start efforts to attract a supermarket or specialty food store to the shopping center, filling a gap in the retail mix to better serve local residents
- Support efforts by owner to add a gas station/convenience store to the shopping center
- Improve the design and look of the parking lot; possible addition of trees, striping or other landscape improvements

Increase visits to Goshen Country Fair and to NW Corner

- Coordinate marketing for the fair with other marketing efforts throughout the region, including websites for other towns and organizations



Long-Term Strategies

Goshen needs a center, not just a traffic circle

- Support the long-term conversion of properties around traffic circle to commercial/retail uses
- Develop a pedestrian friendly village center; approx. ½ mile from traffic circle to Nodine's, fair grounds and both shopping centers

Increase utilization of Goshen Fair Grounds to extend seasonal attractions

- Tie-in to regional agri-tourism marketing

Incorporate Goshen's agricultural assets into branding of the NW Corner

- Farm-to-table agri-tourism could use the country fair and Nodine's as a venue for marketing and merchandising food products
- Fair provides educational opportunities

Potential for in-fill stores at Goshen's Village Market plaza as demand increases

- Re-merchandising the Village Market shopping center could lead to increased demand for retail stores and commercial services
- Plan to accommodate additional buildings on site
- Improve customer access to stores from the parking area; improve image of the plaza as an integrated shopping destination
- Focus tenant selection on convenience stores and restaurant

