

Summary of the Strategic Economic Development Plan For Dover and Wilmington, VT

Tri Town Economic Development Committee

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Assisted by Mullin Associates Inc.

This Strategic Economic Development Plan is designed to help the Towns of Dover and Wilmington improve their economic base and quality of life through economic development. The goal of this Plan is to enhance the tax base through development of diversified land use while maintaining the Towns' community character. Based on a careful review of previous plans, regulatory documents, the character and development capacity of the Towns, local interviews and community workshops, we propose a series of strategic assessments and an action agenda. The major assessments include:

- An analysis of the socio-economic base the communities and its surrounding area, with a focus on demographics, economic profile and retail market potential;
- A summary of input received from both the public and the private sectors. Key leaders in the communities were interviewed and input was solicited during a research and assessment phase; and
- An assessment of the development capacity within the Towns and the region were assessed to create an implementation program that would enable the Towns to move forward with this plan.

Highlights of the economic development strategy are as follows:

The Towns of Dover and Wilmington are facing a period of economic transformation. Long dependent on a steady tourist activity for their job base, it is essential, over the long term, that they begin to expand their base in new directions.

The Towns lie in the Deerfield Valley of Southern Vermont and are overlooked by Mount Snow. Its topography and clean streams are marked by great beauty and have been attracting visitors for more than a century. Their villages are compact and placed along crossroads that lace the region. They still function, to a degree, as the civic and retail hubs of the region. They also contribute to the unique cultural, historic, and recreational characteristics that make Vermont such a special place. They are places of great pride.

The citizens are committed to their communities and have, over time, developed means and methods to invest and make a living in an economy that is quite cyclical. Many will gain their income by cobbling together seasonal jobs, others commute to nearby centers of employment and still others, through their artisanal and professional skills, are able to successfully operate full time local businesses. With the exception of the Mount Snow Ski Company, there are no large businesses in the area. In fact, more than 90% of the companies in the two-town region employ less than five full time workers.

The citizens, while well educated, are not keeping pace with the educational attainment of other parts of Vermont and New England. In fact, its most highly educated workers, including most of its latest graduates, are seeking employment opportunities outside of the two-town region. This exodus, coupled with a falling birthrate and an influx of retirees, is contributing to the towns becoming places of increasingly older citizens.

The two towns are not in a crisis at the moment. However, they are in an economic climate of gradual decline that will only continue if they do nothing. They are able to survive recessions and times of severe distress but are unable to regain that which they have lost and are not growing in new areas. The decline is slow and subtle, but constant. They have no choice but to change if they wish to remain vibrant and maintain their quality of life.

This report focuses upon the state of the two-town economy, assesses current conditions and offers a road map of recommended future actions that are intended to guide the communities in new directions. It calls for seven over-arching actions.

First, they must work rigorously to obtain high speed broadband and fiber optic connectivity. In town after town across New England, the presence of high-speed connectivity is fundamental for almost all economic development. One increasingly hears the mantra “Be wired or be gone”! If the towns are to prosper, they must gain the political support and investment to make this happen.

Secondly, they must increasingly become part of the Vermont economy that emphasizes unique Vermont products and names. The Vermont brand is powerful and adds great value whether at the smallest of levels (a nearby farm selling its own maple syrup) to unique cultural festivals to such nationally identified firms such as Orvis and Cabot cheeses. The Deerfield Valley is laced with small companies that could and should build on the Vermont brand.

Thirdly, the two towns must protect their cultural, historical and topographical character. This means creating additional historic districts, protecting farmlands and adopting architectural/site design standards. It is this uniqueness, specialty and cachet of the two towns that form their critical tourist base. If this character is eroded, their guests will move elsewhere. Bluntly stated, the area has no choice but to stop strip development, increase density in the villages with carefully articulated design standards and maintain its farmlands.

Fourth, the two towns must become partners with Mount Snow. The Mountain represents the largest employer and investor in the region. It is refocusing on how best to capture the changing skiing industry. While one must applaud and encourage this effort, it must be recognized that Mount Snow is increasingly looking inward. The towns and the Mount Snow operators must become partners in four ways: a) All parties must develop opportunities for local firms to compete for business on the mountain; b) Mount Snow officials must help local merchants to gain business from seasonal festivals; c) Large scale business decisions must reflect the need for linkage with the village centers and; d) The towns should become spokespersons and promoters for Mount Snow on topics that require governmental intervention.

Fifth, the towns must create long-term capital improvement programs that are designed to maintain and/or create first rate infrastructure systems. This program should include municipal parking, street lighting, pedestrian amenities in the villages and carefully placed water, sewer and fiber-optic lines in areas where growth is desired. It must also address school needs. In fact, it is a common statement amongst economic development planners that the most important economic development asset for local New England towns is a first class education system: If the two towns are to economically prosper, the schools will play a critical role.

Sixth, the towns must become focused upon creating a climate of constant improvement for its entrepreneurs. To this end, it must strive to integrate the University of Vermont’s Extension Service, Vermont’s Small Business Development Center, the Community College and the Chamber of Commerce into a connected program of technical assistance for its businesses.

And finally, if the towns are seriously committed to making these improvements, they must hire a professional economic development planner. This should be considered as an investment rather than a cost. In fact, the overwhelming numbers of communities that invest in planning typically gain 3-5 times their costs through grants, lowered bond rates, higher valued construction and more appropriately planned functions.

If the towns do nothing, it is likely they will stagnate and move into a long period of gentle decline. If, on the other hand, they embrace the recommendations explained above, they will be well positioned to accomplish their vision, protect their environment, embrace their quality of life, and stimulate the creation of well paying jobs, providing economic opportunities for their children and maintaining their historic and cultural qualities. Above all, they will maintain and enhance their unique places in a special region in an admired State.