Recap: What is the Working Communities Challenge and the White River Valley Consortium?

The Working Communities Challenge is a grant and technical assistance program to help communities in New England work collaboratively on economic issues of their choice.

The White River Valley Consortium is a loosely affiliated network of organizations and residents working to support fourteen towns in the White River Valley.

From 2019-2021, the White River Valley Consortium participated in the “planning” phase of the Working Communities Challenge, which included broad community engagement to identify the most pressing economic challenges for our region. The Consortium was then awarded an “implementation” grant for the years of 2022-2024 to work on increasing the availability of housing that is affordable for early-career young adults and beginning entrepreneurs.

What have we accomplished so far?

In 2022, the first year of the implementation grant, the Consortium began:
1. Offering educational and capacity-building opportunities to the municipalities and community groups within the White River Valley
2. Collecting additional community input and data around housing needs and possible solutions
3. Identifying levers for creating systems change around housing affordability in our region

This annual summary is just a short snapshot of our work… please feel free to reach out if you would like to know more! And, stay tuned for more detail about our plans for the coming year.

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Vital Communities serves as the “backbone organization” for the WRVC, i.e., hosts the staff position, manages grant funding, and takes the lead on communications. Other organizations on the Steering Committee (“core team”) over the past year include: Bar Harbor Bank & Trust, Capstone Community Action, Clara Martin Center, 4-Town Coalition, Green Mountain Economic Development Corporation, Randolph Area Community Development Corporation, Town of Randolph, Town of Royalton, Two Rivers-Ottauquechee Regional Commission.
Educational and Capacity-Building Opportunities

One of the goals of the WRVC in the past year has been to start connecting community leaders with information and resources that can help move the needle on housing. Some of this feeds into the work that the Consortium is planning to do together on a regional scale, but it may also be a catalyst for other new partnerships or specific community-driven projects – addressing our housing challenges will require many different solutions.

- In August we organized a “field trip” for residents of the White River Valley to visit the small-scale (8 unit) infill apartment building being built nearby in Fairlee by Jonah Richard. Attendees got a tour of the building midway through construction and had an in-depth conversation with Jonah, Fairlee Selectboard member Peter Berger, and Fairlee Zoning Administrator Chris Brimmer.

- In September we organized a “Housing Solutions Road Show” which brought staff from the VT Agency of Commerce and Community Development (including the Commissioner), the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and the Vermont Housing Finance Agency, to spend a full half-day in the White River Valley discussing housing resources and barriers with our municipal leaders.

- Several local partner organizations came together in December to host a four-part webinar series on Shared Equity and Collaborative Ownership, featuring 11 guest speakers. Many local professionals in related fields attended, but it was also designed to be an accessible introduction for non-professional community members, including those trying to figure out their own land access situation. You can watch recordings here.

- WRVC backbone organization Vital Communities also began a blog series to explain some of the most popular ideas for how we as a region can address our housing shortage. Stay tuned for more topics to be covered in 2023!

Community Spotlight: Rochester

The Rochester Area Housing Committee was formed at the end of 2021 out of a community process facilitated by the Vermont Council on Rural Development. In 2022, the Committee worked to better understand the underlying causes of their community’s housing challenges, and participated in WRVC events such as the Housing Solutions Road Show. At the end of 2022, the Committee decided to re-engage the community, especially those who had recently moved to town and might not yet be involved in community visioning conversations. In March ’23, the Committee hosted an extremely successful “Hey Neighbor!” event. Over 150 participants, both new and long-time residents, learned about local resources and civic engagement opportunities and connected with friends and neighbors. We are proud to be able to support the Rochester area community leaders in their housing work as part of the Working Communities Challenge.
Community input and data

The White River Valley Consortium is lucky to have access to excellent existing data sources such as Keys to the Valley and the Branchwood (Randolph) & Area-Wide Plan housing market assessment. However, it is also important to groundtruth this data against local knowledge, and to collect community input not just on the problems but also on potential solutions.

In the past year, the WRVC has collected community input through an in-depth survey/interview tool, several focus groups, and participation in community conversations. These conversations are providing: insight into not just what our community’s homeseekers need or want, but why; examples of the unique situations faced by community members; and a more nuanced understanding of the experience of being a homeseeker in the WRV. We also received extremely helpful input about the potential housing solutions that are and aren’t appealing to the community, and how residents are thinking about balancing housing with other community priorities.

A full report on what we heard from our community input process, and corresponding quantitative data, will be available in May 2023.

Exploring levers for systems change

The WRVC also spent significant time in the past year gaining a better technical understanding of potential housing solutions. Together with the input gathered from the community, this knowledge will inform the Consortium’s collaborative work for the remainder of our grant.

Early on, WRVC members collected a list of over 30 ideas for how to support housing in the area, and identified three different lenses with which to look at these potential solutions:

- How effectively does it add the net new units that are so urgently needed?
- Does it improve underlying systems for the long-term?
- Who ultimately benefits and is that equitable?

We then also took into account:

- The input we received from the community
- Partners’ plans and how our work can be complementary rather than duplicative
- Our commitment to supporting the full White River Valley, not simply the towns or individuals who are already most well-resourced

Affordability & Availability

A 2022 market analysis by Doug Kennedy Advisors for the Town of Randolph provides a good illustration of the twin challenges of availability and affordability. This report is publicly available on the Town of Randolph website (and includes information about methodology); here are two examples of what it reveals:

- Percent of Randolph units that are studio apartments: homes

- Percent of Randolph households that are one or two people: people

- Percent of Randolph units that are one-bedroom: homes

- Percent of Randolph households that have an annual income of less than $35,000: people

- Percent of Randolph units that are two-bedroom: homes

- Percent of Randolph households that have an annual income of at least $41,200 to live here affordably: people

- Percent of Randolph households that have an annual income of at least $48,600 to be affordable: people

- Percent of Randolph households that consist of only one or two people: people
Connectivity Beyond the White River Valley: More about the support offered by the Working Communities Challenge

The Working Communities Challenge program is managed by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston in coordination with a Vermont Statewide Steering Committee. In addition to grant funding, the program includes technical assistance from the Vermont Council on Rural Development and various professional development opportunities.

• In June, members of the WRVC attended a daylong summit for the participants in all 8 Vermont WCC teams (pictured below, photo courtesy VCRD)

• In October, four members of the WRVC travelled to Boston to participate in a summit of all 25 communities participating in the Working Communities Challenge across New England, with workshops around systems thinking, adaptive leadership, and more.

• In March, the President of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Susan Collins, visited Vermont. She and several other FRBB staff met with members of the WRVC for lunch and a conversation around housing, our team’s plans, and the area’s economy overall.

The WCC also provides regular opportunities to connect with and learn from the other communities in Vermont that are participating in the program. For example, the teams in Northwestern Vermont (Franklin & Grand Isle counties) and Lamoille County are also focused on housing, and our nearby communities of Greater Barre and the Springfield area are working on issues of economic stability for single mothers and higher quality jobs for un-and under-employed, respectively. You can see a full list of the other Vermont WCC teams here.

These conversations resulted in our current workplan for the coming year, which focuses on three main concepts:

• Supporting the creation of Accessory Dwelling Units by low- and moderate-income homeowners.
• Helping our towns collaborate with the private sector on other housing development.
• Continuing to build relationships and support community organizing around housing.

The full workplan is available here.