DEVELOPING, COLLECTING AND ANALYZING INDICATORS OF DOWNTOWN HEALTH: A HANDBOOK
The Steering Committee met with community partners to establish the Indicators of Downtown Health project.

Transportation and locally owned businesses, such as Bear Pond Books in Montpelier, are indicators of downtown health.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART 1: DOWNTOWNS: WHY DO WE CARE? ......................................................... 1
PART 2: WHY INDICATORS? ............................................................................ 4
PART 3: INDICATORS FOR DOWNTOWNS: A VERMONT CASE STUDY ..... 6
PART 4: GETTING STARTED .......................................................................... 14
PART 5: COLLECTION THE DATA .................................................................. 15
PART 6: HOW TO USE THE DATA .................................................................. 24
RESOURCES .................................................................................................. 28
REFERENCES .................................................................................................. 29
LINKS TO ONLINE DOCUMENTS .................................................................. 29
APPENDICES ................................................................................................... 30
SMART GROWTH PRINCIPLES

★ Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
★ Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
★ Enable a mix of land uses
★ Preserve open space, farmland, forests and other critical environmental areas
★ Provide a variety of transportation choices
★ Create opportunities for walking, bicycling, and other recreation
★ Take advantage of compact building design
★ Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration
★ Make development decisions predictable, far and cost effective
★ Reduce energy use and harmful greenhouse gas emissions
★ Strengthen existing communities

Parking is a critical indicator of health. In Bristol, downtown parking accommodates equestrians — a sure sign of links to the surrounding countryside.
At their best, our downtowns are vibrant community centers with shops, services, and civic functions all within walking distance. These centers often hold the key to the history of a community, a region, a state or a nation. Rather than freezing history in time, the historic buildings in our centers provide continuity with the past. The benefits of the mixed-use design of these centers include:

- Renewed social cohesion;
- A mixture of housing types and price points for community members of different lifestyles and income levels;
- Transportation choice including walking, biking, and public transit as well as automotive vehicles;
- Less intensive infrastructure to support higher density development making delivery of basic services like mail, trash collection and police and fire protection more efficient;
- Reduced carbon dioxide emissions that lead to climate change;
- Less impact on the environment; and
- Opportunities to drive the “new” economy.

Many of our downtowns are threatened by sprawling development that drains investment away from community centers. Across the country, communities have put programs and policies in place to encourage brownfield redevelopment, infill projects, transit oriented development, rehabilitation of historic structures and others designed to reverse sprawl and strengthen our centers.

Vermont is no different. The state legislature has created a series of programs over the last decade– from tax credits to planning assistance to priority for state facilities – to improve the vitality of community centers.

We realized we didn’t know whether these and other programs are enough to get the job done in Vermont. Is the health of our downtowns actually improving? What exactly is a “healthy” downtown? How will new programs – like the Growth Center and Vermont Neighborhood Programs – impact our downtowns? Will they strengthen downtowns by providing new jobs and homes in and around our centers or compete and detract from them? What data do we have available to justify and defend existing programs?
In partnership with the Preservation Trust of Vermont, and the State Downtown Program, Smart Growth Vermont and the University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies launched an initiative to find answers to these important questions. Our goal was to develop a set of indicators of downtown health for our downtowns that provide community leaders with an objective framework for measuring how well their downtowns are doing. In addition, the indicators will help communities evaluate and track the impacts of designated growth centers on downtowns.

Over the course of two years, Smart Growth Vermont and the Center for Rural Studies, with our partners, researched various indicator systems, worked with four communities to gather and test the indicators, and developed a final set of indicators that measure economic health, livability in the downtown, urban form and links to the working landscape. We used a hybrid approach to collecting information. Research by Fraser (2006) suggests that a participatory method, where stakeholders retain ownership of the process, generate information, and enhance action and understanding, allows for the development of meaningful and quantitative benchmarks.

This handbook is designed for downtowns in Vermont and throughout the country to provide information on how to develop and utilize an indicator system. We hope that the lessons we have learned will serve as a guide for others.

We have included links to documents on our website at the end of this publication as well as other resources. These documents include a sample excel spreadsheet that can be customized for indicators applicable to your community. If you are unable to access them through this publication or our website, a limited number of CDs are available. Contact Smart Growth Vermont for information.
VERMONT’S DOWNTOWN, VILLAGE CENTER AND GROWTH CENTER PROGRAMS

For most of Vermont’s history, our downtown and village centers have been the heart of our communities, housing much of our population and serving as civic and economic centers. The state’s character and sense of place is defined by our urban/rural balance – the diversity of compact centers with easy access to nearby farms and the natural environment.

We have invested in these core areas with infrastructure such as sewer and water, public parking, sidewalks and bike lanes that allow for higher densities, a mixture of uses and diverse transportation options. We have located our civic buildings, including town halls, schools and libraries, in these areas to be accessible to all members of the community, and to serve as prominent reminders of our shared values.

In the late 1990’s, many stakeholders came together to ask the question: “Should we continue to invest in our downtowns and village centers, or turn our attention to new centers of commerce and culture?” The answer from all sides was a resounding YES! to investing in our centers. In response, Smart Growth Vermont, together with other non-profits, government agencies and stakeholders, created the Vermont Downtown Program.

The Vermont Downtown Program was first established as an affiliate of the National Main Street Program to provide technical assistance and training to communities and help them develop skills and strategies for their downtown revitalization efforts. Legislation passed in 2002 gave a further boost to downtown development by offering additional financial incentives, permit incentives and other opportunities for downtown development. A village center program and a new town center program were added. Communities that meet a set of criteria can receive the designation which makes them eligible for the incentives. Today, there are 23 designated downtowns and 103 designated village centers. Tax credits to help landowners restore and upgrade historic buildings in designated downtowns and village centers were streamlined – and expanded – and now provide $1.7 million each year, with a one-time $100,000 bump in 2010 from stimulus funds.

Enacted as an expansion of the Downtown Program, the Growth Center Program created a process for municipalities to seek state designation of locally planned growth centers. Growth centers must be planned in accordance with an established set of smart growth principles. A new definition for “growth center” was added, which includes several characteristics of Vermont’s traditional villages and neighborhoods such as a mix of uses, high densities, and pedestrian scale. A new definition of “smart growth” was also added. This definition, which is among the first adopted by a state legislature as part of growth management legislation, is intended guide administrators of the program in their review of applications for growth centers designation. These definitions are based on the premise that growth centers should reflect orderly development in and adjacent to historic downtowns and village centers.

Incentives include different jurisdictional standards, and favorable primary agricultural soils mitigation requirements, under Act 250, and priority for various state funding programs. Clarifications to the Program were passed in 2010.
PART 2: WHY INDICATORS?

Indicators are only powerful when they provide useful information that decision makers can depend on and anticipate in a timely fashion. The issue for effective indicator use lies in the ability of indicators to be simultaneously valid and credible as well as useful and relevant.

The information gathered through the use of indicators can enhance a community’s understanding of the current state of the system, identify trends, and help to predict the impacts of change. Indicators can be used as a planning tool, to enhance decision making and to provide for better evaluation of policies and programs. As a result, indicators are widely used across disciplines and within government and non-governmental organization structures.

Recently indicator use has experienced a renaissance as measures of sustainability, quality-of-life, and natural resource management. These disciplines take a more holistic view of problem solving and therefore indicators become significant for two reasons. They can capture the complexity of our existing systems and they recognize that information gathering can be a way to both build knowledge and social capital among the participants in the communities where sustainability is being measured.

Developing the “right” set of indicators and understanding their limitations is important. McClaren, one of the leaders in the field, lists the following reasons as potential hazards that prevent good indicator work:

- Community participants may not be representative of community members, and they may select indicators that are biased towards their own perceptions.
- Data may not be available. Data availability remains the number one reported problem for selecting indicators that reflect the desired measures. When data can’t be found it is not unusual to drop the indicator and try to find a proxy indicator to better represent it.
- Community groups may lack the expertise to interpret the results correctly and to effectively communicate and disseminate the information to the larger public.

WHY INDICATORS OF DOWNTOWN HEALTH?

The indicators let us see everything from crime, housing, to the dollars invested in the downtown. For example, we compared the type of housing demand and percentage of home owners to the percentage of renters. A community that is nothing but renters indicates to investors that there is potential for sudden shifts in community demographics. Other critical questions include examining the types 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. So some of these indicators tell us who has development potential in their downtown.”

– steering committee member

“My objectives were to have some kind of data to go back to the public, back to investors.”

– former downtown manager
For indicators to be accepted, certain criteria should be met. These include data that is: scientifically valid, available, and accessible over time; relevant to stated goals, cost effective and efficient, unambiguous, comprehensive, can provide timely feedback, is linked to policy and action, and is comparable.

There were several key elements we felt were needed to produce an effective hybrid process for indicator collection:

1. To insure that the data and the process are credible for stakeholders and policy makers, experts need to guide the process, help start the collection process and evaluate indicators.

2. Stakeholder participation is necessary to establish context, motivate discussion about the perception of town health, and collect, evaluate, and set goals for the indicators.

In order to ensure that the process had both the necessary expert elements and stakeholder participation, the Smart Growth Vermont/Center for Rural Studies team oversaw the use of a policy-maker led steering committee, focus groups of community stakeholders, and stakeholders as the primary data collectors. This ensured that the data was relevant, meaningful, and easily available for collection by community members.

A hybrid approach to indicator collection uses participatory methods that allow stakeholders to retain ownership of the process and facilitate the generation of knowledge and enhance action and understanding, while experts help to develop meaningful and quantitative benchmarks through traditional research methods (Fraser 2006).
PART 3: INDICATORS FOR DOWNTOWNS:
A VERMONT CASE STUDY

We researched other indicator projects from around the country and in Canada. From this research, we identified and developed four broad categories of downtown health to measure using a series of data-driven indicators:

★ Economic Vitality. This is a measure of economic well-being of local citizens and the health of the town’s business and industrial sector. The indicators in this category measure the degree of investment in a downtown as well as levels of development activity.

★ Livability and Cultural Identity. This is a measure of those qualities that make a location into a place. Community planning experts agree that a sense of place and community spirit are essential to the health of a community. These indicators seek to measure how well a downtown is meeting the recreational, housing and transportation needs of its residents.

★ Urban Form. This category is focused on spatial patterns of development, with measures of housing density, diversity of development, and municipal infrastructure. These measures will determine if growth is sprawling or compact.

★ Regional Working Landscapes. A crucial measure of downtown health is the health of the downtown’s relationship with its rural surroundings. Given that one of Vermont’s land use goals is to maintain a pattern of compact settlements surrounded by working rural lands, we have chosen to examine a number of indicators related to farmers’ markets, availability of local products, and use of local foods at restaurants.

Four designated downtowns of various size and location worked with us to collect and test the draft indicator list.

Using the Indicators helped Bristol make this stormwater project a priority to support downtown growth.

St. Albans is the hub for a strong agricultural community in Franklin County that produces dairy products, maple syrup and forestry products.
BRISTOL:
Perched in the foothills of the Green Mountains, Bristol is 30 miles from Burlington and 11 miles from both Vergennes and Middlebury. About half the 3,800 residents live in the one square mile core area that is the downtown, with the remainder living on agricultural land and along forest roads. This core area, which was once an independent municipality, houses the downtown business district, industrial sites and residential blocks. It has grown in stature as a cultural center with a lively downtown and a strong sense of community. It is the kind of place where you will end up chatting with several friends on your walk to the bakery or grocery store, bank or post office. On Halloween, people come from other parts of the county to trick-or-treat in Bristol because of its walk-able character.

**Fast Facts:**
- **Size:** 42.2 sq miles
- **Population:** 3,894 entire town (2010 Census)
- **County:** Addison

_Downtown Bristol is an active destination for area shoppers._

_The neighborhoods just off Main Street provide great places for children to trick or treat at Halloween._

_Relaxing in the park_
BURLINGTON:

With a population of over 42,000, Burlington is Vermont’s largest city. Over the last few decades, city leaders have worked to transform Church Street into a pedestrian mall and to ensure the downtown continues to be a vibrant center of retail, night life, music, art and theater. The downtown waterfront, once dominated by lumber mills and shipping terminals, is now a recreational attraction and a magnet for redevelopment. In short, Burlington has successfully made the transition from a 19th century industrial center to a diversified economy founded on manufacturing, higher education, health facilities, high tech and outdoor recreation. In 2008, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention named Burlington as the nation’s healthiest city. Burlington frequently receives recognition as a green city, a family-friendly city, and a good place to enjoy the arts and the outdoors.

Fast Facts:

Size: 15.5 - city
Population: 42,417 city (2010 Census)
County: Chittenden
Nestled along the banks of the Winooski River, Montpelier’s downtown is a compact, bustling center of activity. Montpelier is home to the Vermont State House, with its impressive gold leaf dome; the Vermont Historical Society Museum; The T.W. Wood Art Gallery and Hubbard Park and Tower that offers hiking and skiing trains and an observation tower that provides amazing views of the city. Historic neighborhoods spread out from the downtown, with homes of varying sizes on mostly small lots.

**Fast Facts:**
- **Size:** 10.3 sq miles
- **Population:** 7,855 city proper (2010 Census)
- **County:** Washington

*T.W. Wood left his extensive art collection to the city. The Gallery maintains a permanent exhibit of his work alongside changing exhibits of new artists.*

*Montpelier shops offer a broad selection of retail goods.*

*Montpelier, home to the Vermont Arts council, hosts a number of street art activities each year.*
ST. ALBANS:
Incorporated as a village in 1896 and later as a city in 1902, Saint Albans has long been recognized for its importance as a terminal for the Vermont and Canadian Railroads. The City has designated its boundaries as the Growth Center for the larger St. Albans City and Town area. Activities including the annual Maple Festival and a variety of arts groups help make the City not only the commercial hub for Franklin County, but also a desirable place to live, work and play. It presents a good example of a city that is making efforts to balance growth efforts with sustainable city planning strategies.

Fast Facts:
Size: 15.5 sq miles
Population: 6,918 (2010 Census)
County: Franklin

The Farmer’s Market provides local farmers with a place to showcase their produce, meats, crafts and more.

The fountain in Taylor Park offers a taste of St. Albans’ historic heritage.

Downtown St. Albans is a mix of stores, professional offices, restaurants and apartments.
OUR PROCESS:
The following is a listing of the steps taken and the process used.

ESTABLISH A STEERING COMMITTEE:
We brought together a steering committee made up of the project leads – Smart Growth Vermont, the University of Vermont’s Center for Rural Studies, Preservation Trust of Vermont, and staff from the State’s Downtown Program. Together we determined a general indicator framework to be used and established internal goals for the process. These goals may differ from the actual outcomes and goals that our downtown groups identified for themselves.

PRE-AND POST-DATA COLLECTION FOCUS GROUPS:
Many of our test communities had a downtown board working on strengthening their downtowns for many years. We wanted to get an idea of how healthy they felt their downtowns were, its strengths and weaknesses, and areas that needed work. This “gut check” could be compared with indicator information that came to light after collection and analysis was completed.

Each test community brought together a group of 12-15 individuals actively involved in their downtown – board members, business owners, town representatives, etc. – for an hour and a half focus group. This helped us establish a pre-data collection dialogue on stakeholder perceptions of town health and a context for indicator collection. Each session was led by a member of the project team. Prior to the focus group, participants received an email from us outlining the agenda and discussion topics. During the focus groups, guiding questions were used to ask participants to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their towns regarding the specific areas of indicator collection: urban form, livability, economic vitality, and working landscape. A link to a Word document of focus group guiding questions is provided in the Resources section of this manual.

After the data was collected, we presented the data results to the focus group to get their thoughts on the information and how it compared to their pre-data collection focus group results. These focus groups were set up along the same lines as the pre-collection groups – a one and a half hour semi-structured sessions led by a member of the project team, with participants given the agenda and discussion topics ahead of time.

DIFFERING GOALS FOR DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES:
“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 indicator collection from the local level and from the state level.”

– steering committee member

Input from the Montpelier Focus Group strengthened the resulting Indicators.

The Burlington and Bristol Downtown Managers compare data.
In addition to asking guiding questions about the strengths and weaknesses of their towns regarding urban form, livability, economic vitality, and working landscape, the groups were asked if the data changed their views on any of the issues, if they saw places for action based on the data, and how the process impacted them. See the Resources section for post-collection focus group guiding questions.

**DATA COLLECTION**

We provided each test community with a list of the indicators to collect. Most communities recruited additional volunteers to gather information for the indicators so that there was not an undue burden on an already busy volunteer group. The test community was asked to collect information for each indicator, reference the source of the information and note any difficulties or inconsistencies they experienced. See Resources for a link to a Word document of these indicators.

We collected the “Town Profile Data” – publicly available data from the U.S. Census Bureau and other sources – and presented the information to each test community. We suggested downtowns collect publicly and readily available data on a regular basis. Many federal and state agencies collect relevant demographic and economic indicators, such as age groups, housing types and costs, income levels, taxable sales, crime and more.

Data collection took six months – much longer than expected. Summer months in Vermont are not the best time to ask volunteers to collect information.

During the data collection phase, we were available to answer questions or provide any other support. See Resources for more details on each indicator, where the information was found and how a community might utilize the data.

**DATA EVALUATION**

The project team, Steering Committee and test community representatives met to evaluate indicators, establish benchmarking protocol, and determine how best to present data to a larger stakeholder community. The test communities were able to provide feedback on data that is available and easily collected by stakeholder groups.

The indicators either met one or several of the following criteria:

- ★ High-value
- ★ High-feasibility for collection
- ★ Established a trend
- ★ Had an established standard

**FINALIZE INDICATORS:**

Based on the input from the steering committee, the test communities, and representatives of the post-data collection focus groups, a final list of the top 20 indicators and a secondary tier of indicators was developed. The secondary tier of indicators was selected based on the following criteria:

- ★ High-value, but hard to collect
- ★ Important for future trends as a baseline is developed

Our test towns reported how they planned to use the information moving forward, such as proposing policy changes and creating actions around indicators.

---

**LOVING NUMBERS**

“We had already created an inventory of all space in the downtown as part of our economic committee. Collecting square footage by type was easy, I was able to go through that inventory and note every building, how much sq. footage per floor, total square footage, and its type – commercial, residential, occupied. I had it measured right down to the square foot.”

– former downtown manager
PART 4: GETTING STARTED

BRING TOGETHER YOUR BOARD

Before you send people searching through files, old permits and sending out surveys to your Main Street businesses, bring the individuals together who are involved and invested in your community center. You might already have a board, like those in Vermont, or you might want to engage new people for this project. Make sure you have a broad selection of interests and skills.

Develop or review your vision for your downtown center over several meetings. Review the goals you have and compare with list of indicators. Do they meet your needs? Are there others that you might like to add? Others that you would like to delete? Before you delete any, make sure they are not information required for your state or the National Main Street Program.

ENGAGE YOUR TOWN’S DEPARTMENTS AND DOWNTOWN BUSINESSES

Share the project with members of the various municipal departments – planning and zoning, parks and recreation, municipal services, etc. Let them know that this can be a valuable project not only for the downtown, but also for the community as a whole. Share your visions for the downtown with them and ask for their input and thoughts. Learn more about their procedures for collecting information and how you might work together to collect some of the indicator data. This is an excellent opportunity to engage a variety of community interests: business, government, non-profits, and citizens.

Vermont’s test communities found that much of the data for the National Main Street Program Indicators were very difficult to collect because the information was not being collected during the permitting and zoning process. A meeting with these departments led to a change in protocol so information could be collected moving forward. Main Street Program Indicators are denoted on the linked list.

Bring together the businesses in your center. Share the project with them along with your goals and vision for the area. Engage their support and solicit their participation on sharing information on their business for the project. Ensure them that information will be confidential and used to track trends in the center and compare with other communities. See Resources for a sample business survey.

In a healthy downtown like Montpelier, a stroll to the post office can be accompanied by some window...
PART 5: COLLECTING THE DATA

DATA COLLECTION

Indicator collection is a powerful way to engage the Vermont Downtown Program board and local partners in setting goals for maintaining strong and viable downtown centers. Such a process successfully builds capacity, educates and creates awareness and ensures that indicators are relevant to local communities and linked to action. As your organization embarks on the collection process it is important to keep a few guiding principles in mind. The following is a list of guiding principles that were developed as a result of a case study analysis of the experiences of the four downtowns that piloted the process, development, and collection of indicators.

1. Be clear on your organization’s goals for indicator collection. Make your goals action oriented. Link indicators to focused action. The indicators you collect will measure your progress towards meeting your goals because they are integrated in a continuous process of values definition, opportunity identification, and strategic planning. Since the purpose of using a hybrid process is to inform action around the use of indicators, it is not necessary to make public involvement and discussion the primary goal of indicator collection because public discourse is a logical by-product of action-oriented goal setting.

2. Allocate an appropriate amount of time to define your goals. This is one of the most important steps in the hybrid process and it will set your organization up to repeat the hybrid process on a yearly basis as you continue to collect indicators. Baseline data collection may be your goal when you first get started, but you need to be ready to move forward from there. This will require repeating the hybrid process. As an organization you may find that your impression of the downtown’s different opportunities and challenges is redefined by the data you collect. From goal setting through to evaluating data it is important that, as an organization, you continue to be reflective and evaluative and looking to move the organization to set performance goals around measures.

3. Include stakeholders and partners with policy and action capabilities in the process. Designated Downtown Program boards are largely stewards of the downtown and not decision makers. The make-up of your board can benefit your project and your downtown. For example, if you don’t have a Selectboard representative or high value

Include non-profit as well as for-profit downtown businesses in your survey to ensure complete data collection of all economic interests.
property owner on your board your discussion of downtown health and goal setting will be less effective. Successfully linking indicators to action oriented outcomes is largely dependent on your partners. Integrate local government and other representatives of your downtown constituency into your goal setting, performance and process evaluation. This is an important step towards insuring that your organization’s indicator work is meaningful to all relevant constituencies in the downtown and that your organization has the support it needs to successfully achieve the goals that were established around measures.

4. At the outset of the process underscore the importance of regular and timely participation in indicator collection, goal setting, and evaluation. Create an annual calendar for engaging the downtown organization in each step of the hybrid process. Annual indicator collection ensures that there is a continual feedback loop driven by data that revolves around a logical process and employs annual goal setting, linking data to action-oriented outcomes, and evaluating progress.

Our preliminary experiences with the four Vermont test communities showed how important it is to ensure that there is representation and participation from all relevant stakeholders throughout the use of indicators to measure downtown health and that they engage in a process that emphasizes goal setting and performance evaluation based on indicator data.

PROCESS:

Review the indicators list, divide the indicators and assign various individuals a set to collect the data. Set a deadline for completion. Provide forms (paper or electronic) to report the results.

On the following pages are details for each of the indictors – what information to collect, where to find the information and how it might be utilized.

“The employment numbers were tough to ascertain. There are a lot of “mom and pop” operations in St. Albans and we only received 10% back on our employment surveys. As a result, the chair of our economic board and I went through the list of indicators and estimated the number of employees for each business, and estimated conservatively. I find that some business owners are reluctant to talk about how many people they employ.

— former downtown manager

Locally owned businesses, such as Honey Lights in Bristol, are part of a downtown’s character.

One Indicator is a measure of emergency response time. Having fire, rescue and police stations within the downtown increases this.
**Indicator 1: Net of all gains and losses in jobs in last year (Main Street Program Indicator)**

*Measure:* Specify the number of jobs gained or lost
*Collection Method:* Annual business survey

**Indicator 2: Net of all gains and losses in businesses in last year (Main Street Program Indicator)**

*Measure:* Specify the number of jobs gained or lost
*Collection Method:* Annual business survey or quarterly visual inventory
*Notes:* There was discussion of whether this is just first floor businesses or all the businesses in the downtown. It was determined that all businesses – service, office, retail, professional, etc. – should be included.

**Indicator 3: Number of building rehabilitation projects in last year**

*Measure:* Number of projects. Consider collecting value and square footage.
*Collection Method:* Downtown tax credit report and building permits. Follow up on permits to verify activity.
*Notes:* Many towns do not collect this information in a clear or consistent manner. To find this number will require collaboration with other town departments/staff; consider a project cost floor for inclusion. This is a good opportunity to work with town staff to develop a system to better track this information. Look for opportunities on permitting forms to include this data.

**Indicator 4: Number of public improvement projects in last year (Main Street Program Indicator)**

*Measure:* Number. Also suggest collecting value and square footage.
*Notes:* Many towns do not collect this information in a clear or consistent manner. To find this number will require collaboration with other town departments/staff; consider a project cost floor for inclusion. This is a good opportunity to work with town staff to develop a system to better track this information. Look for opportunities on permitting forms to include this data.

---

Downtown Historic Tax Credits can bring buildings back to life and back to the tax rolls. In St. Albans, the former Fishman Building received tax credits in 2009 and is flourishing with a mix of uses — from high-end suites to retail business.

Montpelier has carved out “pocket parks,” such as the one above where they host summer brown bag concerts, and the one below on land conserved by the Trust for Public Land.
**Indicator 5: Number of new construction projects in last year**

*Measure:* Number. Also suggest collecting value and square footage.

*Collection Method:* Building permits

*Notes:* Many towns do not collect this information in a clear or consistent manner. To find this number will require collaboration with other town departments/staff; consider a project cost floor for inclusion. This is a good opportunity to work with town staff to develop a system to better track this information. Look for opportunities on permitting forms to include this data.

**Indicator 6: Number of housing units created in last year by type (all types).**

*Measure:* Number by type.

*Collection Method:* Building permits

*Notes:* Many towns do not collect this information in a clear or consistent manner. To find this number will require collaboration with other town departments/staff; consider a project cost floor for inclusion. This is a good opportunity to work with town staff to develop a system to better track this information. Look for opportunities on permitting forms to include this data.

**Indicator 7: Value of all private investment spent on indicators 3-6 (Main Street Program Indicator)**

*Measure:* Value of PRIVATE investment in any rehabilitation, improvement, construction and new housing units. Consider disaggregating by project type.

*Collection Method:* Building permits

*Notes:* This indicator is a Main Street Program Indicator as is Value of Public Investment. It is a very effective way to demonstrate the benefits of public investment and the resulting private investment expenditure.

**Indicator 8: Value of public investment spent on indicators 3-6 (Main Street Program Indicator)**

*Measure:* Value of PUBLIC investment in any rehabilitation, improvement, construction and new housing units. Consider disaggregating by project type.

*Collection Method:* Town should collect on a project-by-project basis.

*Notes:* It may be necessary to talk with town officials to get this number.

**Indicator 9: Retail Vacancy Rate**

*Measure:* Vacancy of 1st and 2nd floors

*Collection Method:* Visual survey

*Notes:* This information is valuable to commercial real estate agents as well as being information to promote discussion and in identifying business retention or loss as well as potential recruitment.

Champlain Housing Trust’s new headquarters was part of a multi-faceted infill, historic restoration and brownfield development project in Burlington that resulted in a mix of affordable and market-rate homes funded by private and public funds.
**Indicator 10: Commercial Vacancy Rate**

*Measure:* Vacancy of 1st and 2nd floors  
*Collection Method:* Visual survey  
*Notes:* This information is valuable to commercial real estate agents as well as being information to promote discussion and in identifying business retention or loss as well as potential recruitment.

**Indicator 11: Square footage infill potential**

*Measure:* Square footage  
*Collection Method:* Visual survey; town plan; town administrator  
*Notes:* This information is valuable to commercial real estate agents as well as being information to promote discussion and in identifying business retention or loss as well as potential recruitment. Consider developing a base map and track development of these spaces; also consider this a marketing opportunity.

**Indicator 12: Rental housing demand**

*Measure:* Percent of vacancy  
*Collection Method:* Real Estate agents and ads, property owners (and housing trusts), management companies, market analysts.

**Indicator 13: Mixture of housing types**

*Measure:* Number by type (single family; duplex; multifamily)  
*Collection Method:* Downtown inventory; citydata.com

**Indicator 14: First floor development mix**

*Measure:* Total number of service, retail, food, professional offices, religious, residential, and government entities  
*Collection Method:* Visual survey  
*Notes:* Downtowns should be sure to list where their survey areas are located for consistency.

**Indicator 15: Second floor development mix**

*Measure:* Square footage of available space and percent of retail, commercial, and residential.

**Indicator 16: Crime**

*Measure:* Number by type (property; people; society)  
*Collection Method:* State Crime Info Center  
*Notes:* Distinguish between downtown and town.

**Indicator 17: Number of entertainment activities that extend town life beyond 5 pm**

*Measure:* Number by type (bars; restaurants; art venues; public events)  
*Collection Method:* Brainstorm as a downtown organization; survey; business survey  
*Notes:* May want to add question on business survey re: activity times.

**Indicator 18: Attractions/Events**

*Measure:* Number  
*Collection Method:* Brainstorm as a downtown organization, town event calendar  
*Notes:* Report only big attractions or events, i.e. street festivals, museums, etc.

Restoration of historic structures, such as this in downtown Burlington, provide renovated space for retail and residential use of upper floors.
**Indicator 19: Parking**  
*Measure:* Number of available parking spaces  
(consider dividing between public and private spaces)  
*Collection Method:* Visual survey, business survey, public works, town plan

**Indicator 20: Percentage of locally owned businesses**  
*Measure:* Number with percentage  
*Collection Method:* Business survey  
*Notes:* Develop and provide guidelines on treatment of locally owned franchises and maintain consistency

**Indicator 21: Real Estate demand for the downtown, town, and county**  
*Measure:* Average property values and average time spent on the market for the downtown, town, and county, as a snapshot. Residential vs. commercial  
*Collection Method:* MLS, real estate agents

**Indicator 22: Traffic calming**  
*Measure:* Number of crosswalks per mile; number of pedestrian crosswalks with traffic signals per mile as a snapshot  
*Collection Method:* Visual survey; public works department  
*Notes:* Develop a list so you can remember from year-to-year

**Indicator 23: Number of elderly care services per capita**  
*Measure:* Number by service (residential; centers; home programs; rehab etc.)  
*Collection Method:* Brainstorm list as a downtown organization, visual survey. Consider contacting a social service provider, such as a home health agency, for information.  
*Notes:* Develop a list and be consistent between service types

**Indicator 24: Number of eating establishments**  
*Measure:* Number of full service; counter; bar; and coffee  
*Collection Method:* Visual survey, business survey

**Indicator 25: Percent of businesses that sell locally produced goods and foods**  
*Measure:* Number and need to define locally produced goods and foods; be consistent  
*Collection Method:* Visual survey, business survey

Businesses, such as this bakery in Bristol, can provide venues for evening arts activities to extend downtown life past 5 p.m.

**Indicator 26: Restaurants with local food agreements**  
*Measure:* Number, need to determine if it is a formal or informal agreement and list; be consistent.  
*Collection Method:* Business survey or Vermont Fresh Network  
*Notes:* Many felt that Vermont Fresh Network did not represent all restaurants with local food agreements and thought that it was better to ask on business survey.

**Indicator 27: Number of active arts venues**  
*Measure:* Number  
*Collection Method:* Visual survey
**Indicator 28: Density of housing units in downtown**

*Measure:* Number of housing units per sq. mile or acre

*Collection Method:* Determine the measurement area that is most relevant to your downtown. You may find it beneficial to measure housing units in the periphery and in adjacent areas. Using visual surveys and other property data to determine the number of housing units and then divide by the square mileage or acreage of your measurement area.

*Notes:* Downtowns should be sure to list where their measurement areas are located for consistency.

**Indicator 29: Sidewalks**

*Measure:* Number of miles of sidewalks as a snapshot; compare with miles of streets

*Collection Method:* Public works, or walk with a measuring wheel

*Notes:* Make a base map that can be updated annually.

**Indicator 30: Bike lanes**

*Measure:* Miles of bike lanes as a snapshot, compare with miles of street

*Collection Method:* Public works, or walk with a measuring wheel

*Notes:* Make a base map that can be updated annually.

**Indicator 31: Percent of farmer’s market vendors from within a 50 mile radius**

*Measure:* Percent

*Collection Method:* Farmer’s market survey, market manager

**Indicator 32: Average distance consumer traveled to Farmer’s Market**

*Measure:* Miles

*Collection Method:* Farmer’s market survey, or market manager

**Indicator 33: Average number of visitors to market**

*Measure:* Number

*Collection Method:* Market survey, or market manager

**Indicator 34: Number of Community Supported Agricultures with drop-off points in downtown**

*Measure:* Number

*Collection Method:* NOFA or brainstorming session

Montpelier’s annual Fourth of July parade is a destination for residents and visitors alike.

Sidewalks are an important part of a healthy downtown.
LOWER PRIORITY INDICATORS:

**Indicator: Alternatives to private car**
*Measure:* Number of alternative transportation projects per capita. List by type of transit; rideshare, etc.
*Collection Method:* Brainstorm as an organization or planning commission

**Indicator: Elementary school growth rate**
*Measure:* Change in enrollment numbers
*Collection Method:* Local schools
*Notes:* Important due to link between housing demand and school attendance.

**Indicator: Number of doctors in downtown**
*Measure:* Number; can include holistic and traditional healers
*Collection Method:* Business inventory
*Notes:* Important statistic for quality of life listing and marketing of downtown

**Indicator: Number of green spaces**
*Measure:* Number and acres
*Collection Method:* Parks and recreation; town plan
*Notes:* Important quality of life indicator. Link between property values and green spaces.

**Indicator: Average emergency response time**
*Measure:* Average minutes to respond for police, fire, and ambulance
*Collection Method:* Police, fire, and ambulance contacts; may be a consolidated response time
*Notes:* Not a priority indicator

**Indicator: Youth activities**
*Measure:* Number of organized youth activities in last full year
*Collection Method:* Brainstorm as an organization, contacting school or youth organizations.
*Notes:* Consider dividing by type: school; organization; special event; etc. and be consistent

Restaurants find that advertising their participation in the Vermont Fresh Network and their commitment to buying local foods helps business.

Montpelier’s Farmers’ Market attracts vendors and shoppers from the surrounding countryside.

“First Night has made Burlington’s annual New Year’s Eve celebration a safe, healthy, family-friendly event with activities and entertainment for the whole family.”

- Michael Schirling, Burlington Police Chief
YES/NO INDICATORS:

The presence or absence of these amenities are linked to the health of a downtown. They represent anchors that draw businesses and people to the downtown. These are generally easy to collect:

**Indicator:**
- ★ Post Office (central to downtown?)
- ★ Grocery Store in or adjacent to downtown
- ★ Banks (not just ATMs)
- ★ School in or adjacent to downtown (categorize elementary/middle vs secondary)
- ★ Court House (central to downtown?)
- ★ Town Hall (central to downtown?)
- ★ Library
- ★ Home/Hardware Store
- ★ Farmer’s Market (central to downtown?)

Once all the data is completed, compile it into a centralized spread sheet such as the sample available online.

Bring the centralized data to your committee as well as municipal and business leaders to review the data and note any promising or worrisome information.

Develop a strategy to utilize the information when setting your strategic goals for the coming year.

The City of Santa Monica has pursued a results-oriented strategy for using indicators to achieve measureable improvement in the environmental and social conditions that the city has control over. The table below is an example of how a downtown can set goals and targets and measure success by tracking indicators.

Goal setting in this manner allows the stakeholders to easily engage in a process that can institutionalize the use of a continuous feedback loop and allow communities to refine goals, targets, and indicators and maintain discourse around important planning issues.

The Santa Monica Sustainable City Program: Selected Goals, Targets and Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy area</th>
<th>Community and economic development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Goals**                    | ★ Encourage the development of compact, mixed-use pedestrian oriented projects  
|                              | ★ Promote the growth of local businesses that provide employment opportunities to Santa Monica residents  
|                              | ★ Facilitate education programs that enrich the lives of all members of the community |
| **Targets**                  | ★ Provide 750 additional affordable housing units  
|                              | ★ Create three new community gardens  
|                              | ★ Establish partnership with local schools to create a Sustainable Schools Program  
|                              | ★ Increase total public open space by 15 acres |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>1990 (Actual)</th>
<th>1993 (Actual)</th>
<th>2000 (Target)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deed- restricted Affordable Housing</td>
<td>1,172 units</td>
<td>1,313 units</td>
<td>1,922 units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Gardens</td>
<td>two gardens</td>
<td>two gardens</td>
<td>five gardens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of a Sustainable Schools Program</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Open Space</td>
<td>164 acres</td>
<td>164.8 acres</td>
<td>180 acres</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since this is a new project, we were worried that we would have little to say in this section of the handbook. Instead, our communities and steering committee members have lots of ideas for how the information from the indicators provides insight for the downtowns moving forward and they have begun to take steps based on the information and the process. Ideas ranged from bringing municipal partners together to strategic direction changes, marketing opportunities and even suggestions for state legislative programs.

All the communities want to continue to collect statistics. They always say it with the qualifier, “This was a lot of work,” but they all say that they and their boards want to continue collecting this information. They agree that gathering indicator information is great for both developing marketing material and as a way to talk about our communities. On the local level the most important uses include: marketing; telling the story of the town’s strategic planning by governing boards; and setting goals. In a couple years of data collection trends will start to emerge and successes will be easier to measure.

**HOW TO USE:**

The indicators have a number of uses.

1. They can help you illustrate that your downtown is getting better. That is a positive story and people gravitate toward success. More activities, better shopping, more dining, whatever it is that creates a positive buzz can help build momentum, bring in new volunteers and attract employers and residents.

2. They help to focus the downtown organization and their capacity to put together a strategic plan for their downtown. If the downtown organization doesn’t have direction, then they are bumping around from project to project without any broader goal that they are trying to accomplish with partners.

3. They help paint a picture, monitor success and note projects that don’t succeed. Funders like to see and measure success and volunteers like to feel that they are part of success. The whole feeds and helps a downtown group move forward, improve their focus, obtain resources and monitor progress.

4. State and private investment will be supported by these indicators. They can help policy makers get a more complete
picture of the downtown so they can see the growth potential and track progress.

**STRATEGIC FOCUS**

One of our steering committee members wanted the downtown organizations to use the indicators to drive work plans and strategic planning. The downtown organizations are required to turn in a budget and a work plan to the state Designated Downtown Program every year and this member hoped that the indicators and the work plan would align: Is there anything that is correlating, i.e. economic development program is beefing up, or we are talking to property owners about investing in housing in the downtown? She wanted to see some positive and strategic steps being taken by the downtown programs and that the process 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.”

**TRACKING TRENDS**

One of our participants hoped that the process will encourage downtown organizations to look at their numbers, see if they are tracking any trends, and where best to focus resources, ask questions, target vacancy rates or invest infrastructure dollars. Trend tracking helps put issues into perspective. For example, a town has a vacancy and everyone panics, but it is the first vacancy they have had in three quarters.

**PERCEPTION VS REALITY**

The indicators were useful in separating fact from fiction. One community had the perception that businesses were leaving. As they tracked the new businesses coming in, they found the situation was not as bad as they had thought. The vacancy rate was about 11% which and there were several businesses starting to percolate up into Main Street locations. When they started the project businesses were leaving. Towards the end of the year the vacancies started to fill. It was an exciting and positive surprise.

**MARKETING**

Indicators can provide a wonderful way to market and share success in a community. As a former downtown coordinator said, “I think it 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 investment over the last six years that is huge: it is also a way to combat negative press with the indicator data.”
Several of our test communities used the information to create brochures and social marketing tools to recruit employers to town and employees who would choose to live in town. The indicators are also important for talking to perspective investors and entrepreneurs. They show what a downtown is doing and how much is going on in terms of the program and investment they get when they locate in the area.

CREATING A LARGER DIALOGUE

One of the downtown programs used the indicators to create a larger dialogue on an issue of concern. They had maintained a spreadsheet on vacancies that was updated monthly. This process helped them realize that they needed to have a larger discussion about why certain properties are vacant. Is the property owner difficult? Is the space too large? Is the rent too high? Having the data is very helpful and helped them realize that it isn’t just a question about a property being vacant – there is more to the story. They decided to meet with the commercial real estate brokers on a regular basis, bring the vacancies to them and discuss what is going on to gain their insight and perspective.

CREATING A COHESIVE TEAM: MAINTAINING THE DATA

One of our participants felt this could be a way to create links and relationship with others in municipal government. They recommended that the directors of the downtown organizations meet with their zoning and planning staff and provide the leadership and support to build the mechanisms to collect data that are not there currently. They highlighted the need for some kind of mechanism to maintain and update the data in the municipality so that the downtown organization can collect and monitor it, perhaps with a database that everyone has access to in the municipality or one department as the keeper with everyone else providing their piece of data.

GETTING AHEAD OF THE GAME

Best put by downtown coordinator, Carol Wells: “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 can start to see things shifting, such as lots of vacancies or the housing market, and maybe the warning signs will show themselves in some of these indicators before a really obvious problem develops. By regular collection, the indicators should be able to give you a leg up on problems as they are coming down the road. They can show the results of

INDICATORS OF DOWNTOWN HEALTH
investment, how important the investment is in the downtown, and underscore and celebrate positive trends.”

LESSONS LEARNED

Here are some of the other facts, lessons or eye-openers our participants learned:

★ There is a need for more housing of diverse types. The demand for living in downtown is increasing, but the housing supply isn’t there to meet the need.

★ The crime numbers raised an issue for one of our steering committee members. We started looking at the crime information early in the process and had a discussion about whether or not crime was an important indicator. The Vermont Downtown Program has seen at least five communities who are dealing with non-violent crime such as aggressive or harassing behavior, panhandling, and loitering. This indicator helped them realize that we have an issue in our downtowns that is universal and we might be able to work together on solutions.

★ There is very little local land use data, including inventories of acres of open space, conserved land, or farms gained and lost from the State, regional planning commissions, or other likely sources.

★ By developing a building inventory that is accessible online, anyone can see where the potential for investment and development is in a community in conjunction with a snapshot of what is in the downtown, the market, the services, etc.

★ Combine the inventory with a 3-D model so you have the visual concept to augment the data.

A group of local entrepreneurs is turning Bristol’s former Autumn Harp company complex into a mixed-use development with a focus on health and wellness, value-added food products, educational services, light manufacturing and housing.

The inventory of St. Albans downtown properties includes vacancies as well as uses for each building, such as this one on Congress Street which currently has a first floor retail vacancy.

The Steering Committee and representatives from each of the four pilot communities shared what they felt worked well and what could use improvement in collecting and reporting downtown data.
Montpelier’s Mountaineers Minor League baseball team provides summer downtown entertainment that adds to the city’s quality of life.

St. Albans’ Taylor Park provides a downtown venue for a wide range of events.

Bristol’s Bobcat Café is an evening destination for diners.

Burlington’s Flynn Theatre attracts business to the downtown, especially audience members seeking pre- and post-event meals.
RESOURCES

National Main Street Program, http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/

For examples of how other communities and states are using and reporting on indicators visit:

Quality of Life in Hawaii – 2005 Report

Jacksonville Community Council is a founding member of the International Community Indicators Consortium and has an interactive website for reporting and monitoring indicators in Florida. http://www.jcci.org/jcciwebsite/pages/indicators.html

The Boston Indicators Project is an online mapping tool and partnership between the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) and the Boston Indicators Project makes available a wealth of data about 101 cities and towns in Eastern Massachusetts. http://www.bostonindicators.org/Indicators2008/

City of Santa Monica’s Sustainable City Plan demonstrates how to integrate indicators into planning and directly link indicators to goals and targets. The plan has concrete goals and targets for tracking Santa Monica’s current progress on the Plan. http://www.smgov.net/Departments/OSE/progressReport/default.aspx

For more links and resources on Community Indicator Projects visit The Center for Civic Partnerships Community Indicators resource http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/tools_resources/community_indicators.htm

Suggested reading on development and use of indicators for planning, management and measuring outcomes:

“Indicators and Information Systems for a Sustainable Future,” by Donnella Meadows. Published by the Sustainability Institute, 1998. This paper presents an overview of why indicators are important and how to use them. http://www.sustainabilityinstitute.org/pubs/Indicators&Information.pdf

The BC Sprawl Report informed many of the indicators and types of measurement used in this indicator project. The study uses key indicators in the areas of urban form, livability and economic vitality to compare communities in British Columbia and was published in 2004. Authors: Don Alexander, Ray Tomalty and Mark Anielski. http://www.smartgrowth.bc.ca/Default.aspx?tabid=155
REFERENCES:


ONLINE DOCUMENT LINKS

The following documents can be downloaded directly using the links provided or from our website, www.smartgrowthvermont.org/help/indicators/.

- Indicator List — Microsoft Word
- Indicator Spreadsheet — Microsoft Excel
- Chart of “Yes/No” Indicators— Microsoft Excel
- Pre data collection focus group questions — Microsoft Word
- Post data collection focus group questions — Microsoft Word
- Self-Assessment — Microsoft Word
- Interviews with project participants — PDF
- Hybrid Approach — PDF
- Business Owners Survey — Microsoft Word
- Mixed use density maps — PDF
- Working with Other Departments — PDF
APPENDIX 1: HYBRID PROCESS

(Fraser, Dougill et al. 2006) pg. 119
Figure 2 illustrates how the Fraser, Dougill et al. (2006) process was adapted to develop indicators to measure downtown health.

(also available as downloadable PDF from website)