

To: The Hardwick Gazette

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Headline: Town-wide Themes Revealed: New Town Manager June Gatherings

Dateline: HARDWICK - by Helen Beattie

What do Hardwickians treasure the most about their town? According to the 211 attendees of the five June “Meet the New Town Manager” evening neighborhood gatherings, they include the physical beauty that surrounds us, the diversity and acceptance of residents, a sense of safety, access to basic necessities and the satisfaction of volunteering, where you can make a real difference.

However, the theme that surfaced most consistently was the strong sense of community. In the words of one participant, “The sense of community here is visible, real, tangible”. Another noted, “If you are gonna make relationships and build a future, this is a good place.” A lifelong resident noted, “There have been many waves of good and hard times over the years, but always community by your side to celebrate and get through hard times.”

Each of these evening gatherings, organized by 29 residents who formed five neighborhood host teams, differed in the food served, the locations, and the attendees. Yet, a deep pride and commitment to this town, and to each other, was readily apparent across events. So too was the joy of being able to gather in community once again, and explore the strengths and future direction of the town through the perspective of Opie Upson, our town manager. More than once participants noted that this was the first time that a town manager has ever come to their neighborhood to listen to their thoughts and ideas.

After-dinner discussions focused on strengths, challenges and the future direction of the town. Opie shared his vision of building a “community mental health” model, improving our local capacity to support all residents. He reviewed his vision of the shifting roles of police officers to incorporate enhanced mental health support. His long term vision includes a multi-town police force, with Hardwick serving as a hub, thereby reducing the taxpayers’ cost for this service.

Attendees voiced concerns about affordability challenges (e.g. the high tax rate, rising housing and fuel costs), the need for better parking, and ways to address an aging infrastructure (e.g. deteriorating sidewalks, water and septic systems). Concerns about the burning and disposal of trash also surfaced repeatedly. Attendees expressed a desire for more youth recreational options and opportunities for meaningful volunteer work, building pride, ownership and skills in

the process. Opie highlighted the number of available volunteer vacancies to be filled (e.g. Development Review Board, Planning Commission, Energy Committee).

Excitement about the spring opening of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail was coupled with brainstorming ways to optimize this economic opportunity. Opie shared progress on replacing the swinging bridge, creating a green space by the Daniel's Block, and updated the Yellow Barn project status. He noted that addressing the downtown wastewater capacity was critical to future economic development. The Downtown Commission is working on a strategic plan to act on these opportunities.

At several gatherings, participants voiced concern about focusing on town aesthetics rather than addressing deeper social divisions. In the words of one participant, "Let's help all people lead a healthy life". Opportunities to share time together that lessen divisions was voiced as one key solution. Attendees shared excitement about the potential for the Jeudevine Library expansion to better serve residents, and the new Civic Standard organization being formed in the Gazette Building with a mission to "make events where everyone is welcome, and everyone comes."

Hardwick Area Neighbor to Neighbor (HANtN) partnered with the town to help organize and document these gatherings. The themes that emerged have already served to inform the town manager and the select board representatives who attended every event.

HANtN will attend a Select Board meeting to share these themes and the many suggestions to address the town's challenges. The consultant supporting the Downtown Commission and the new Community Development Coordinator will be drawing on participants' ideas and concerns as they complete grant applications. Any individual or organization wishing the full overview of the gathering themes can find it on the town website (<https://hardwickvt.gov/>) or email hardwickneighbors@gmail.com.

The following words of international mediator and peace-keeper Margaret Wheatley have informed HANtN since its inception: "There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about." HANtN will soon meet to plan its future direction, focusing on means to support similar gatherings and build on Hardwick's already vibrant sense of community.