

In Newport

“Newport is the jewel of our county”

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by Bill Stenger, president of Jay Peak Resort, who asked those present “what are the brand characteristics of our region and our city?”

Vermont as a whole, he said, has an excellent brand. We are, he said, “known to be a community of caring individuals who work together and care about each other.” Mr. Stenger said Newport could also project a positive image of itself.

“Newport is the jewel of our county,” he said.

Mr. Stenger pointed out that the Internet offers opportunities to spread a sophisticated message at a small cost. As a result, he said, “Jay Peak can compete with Vail. Newport can compete with Boston.”

Joss Besse, who directs the downtown program for the state Agency of Commerce and Community Development, gave a slide presentation that showed examples of business districts that have been revitalized through community effort.

He had before and after photographs of Vergennes, which demonstrated a shabby Main Street that has been rehabilitated. For years, Mr. Besse said, Vergennes business leaders insisted that no progress could be made without taking truck traffic off the city’s main thoroughfare. Finally, Mr. Besse said, they decided that they could afford to wait no longer. The results, which included plantings, access ramps and empty buildings given new life as shops and restaurants.

Mr. Besse said his organization is ready to give advice and assistance to Newport, but the real work must be done by community members.

In order to become a designated downtown, Newport residents must come together to decide what they want to do, create a work plan, and a budget.

Downtown designation, Mr. Besse said, could result in grants from an \$800,000 downtown transportation fund. Property owners could also be eligible for tax credits. The state has a \$41.5-million pool of credits, of which some is designated for historic buildings, some for bringing buildings up to code, and some for façade improvements.

The city could also receive priority consideration for a variety of state programs, Mr. Besse said.

Ms. Sears gave the crowd a pep talk and pledged to work with Newport residents to bring change to downtown.

“We’re going to bring Newport City raring to go into the twenty-first century,” she said.

When Ms. Sears opened the floor to questions, it was clear that not everyone understood the process.

“You have a job to do,” a man stated.

From across the room Sherry Norris, owner of the Landing, shouted back, “We, we, we.”

Newport City Manager John Ward gave the view from the municipal building, “We had a vibrant downtown in the sixties, that’s what we want to bring back for selfish reasons. More economic activity means more taxes,” he said.

There was a short break during which about half those attending the meeting made their departure. Those who remained chose from a menu of three topics for discussion, economic restructuring, promotion and design.

The economic restructuring group needed only a few moments to compile a list of downtown problems, ranging from the lack of street life after 4 p.m. to the need for a place to hold arts events.

It was agreed that Newport’s downtown is dependent on a few anchor stores, notably the Pick and Shovel and the Landing. Tim Hamblett, owner of the Pick and Shovel, said he is

concerned about plans to bring big-box stores to Route 5 in Derby. “The downtown is being marginalized,” he said, adding that 50 to 60 percent of his inventory is duplicated by Wal-Mart. Should a store such a Home Depot follow Wal-Mart to Derby, Mr. Hamblett said, it would be hard to stay in business.

Mr. Besse observed that it is “a lot easier to keep what you’ve got than to replace what is gone.”

Rick Woodard, owner of the old Montgomery Ward building, said Newport doesn’t want to lose key businesses like the Pick and Shovel.

Both Ms. Norris and Mr. Hamblett said that there aren’t enough local people to sustain a large business. Each said they depend on summer tourism to boost their businesses.

John Watson, the leader of the group, suggested that Newport doesn’t make the best use of its waterfront. He told of visiting the city and failing to find a boat to rent for fishing. Instantly several people mentioned possible boat rental options.

Mr. Watson said his point was that he couldn’t find a fishing boat, not that there weren’t boats to be had. He said the downtown organization might want to figure out ways to let tourists know about recreational and shopping opportunities.

After about half an hour’s worth of discussion the three groups reconvened. After each group aired its recommendations, Ms. Sears promised that she would schedule meetings soon to continue the work. Mr. Besse offered to hold workshops to help each group move toward creating a work plan for Newport’s downtown.

Ms. Sears sent everyone out into the night, reminding them that Newport needs “to start getting a taste for success.”