

NEWPORT CITY ON NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES IT IS NOW SEEKING DOWNTOWN DESIGNATION

BY ROBIN SMITH, Staff Writer
The Caledonian Record
Friday January 12, 2007

NEWPORT CITY -- Newport City is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

That recognition is the first step among many to becoming a designated downtown in Vermont, and gaining the tools, expertise and funds to explore the city's untapped future.

The city's downtown coordinator, Patricia "Trish" Sears, is hosting a special gathering on Jan. 24 from 6 to 9 p.m. at the Gateway Center. Sears and a team of experts will lead a discussion of the process of becoming a designated downtown, and the benefits.

Sears wants to ask this question of everyone: "What should Newport look like in five years?"

Sears is inviting everyone who lives, works or uses the city's downtown - and that includes people from across Vermont's North Country. The meeting will be catered and child care will be provided.

The city went on the National Register in October.

The downtown district encompasses the commercial core and immediately adjacent residential neighborhoods, including 121 contributing buildings.

According to a description on the Preservation Trust of Vermont Web site, the downtown is mostly commercial with examples of domestic, institutional, fraternal, industrial and ecclesiastical structures.

Most buildings were built between the 1840s and 1955. The styles range from Greek Revival to Colonial Revival and the American International style.

The buildings show most of their original distinctive materials and features. They "reflect the growth and evolution of Newport as an important economic and social center in northern Vermont with a thriving economy based on the lumber industry, maritime activity, the railroad and tourism," the Preservation Trust notes in its newsletter.

Newport City is the last city in Vermont to go after the Downtown Designation through the Vermont Downtown Program, Sears said.

Sears has a contract with the city to create a nonprofit organization that will see the city through the changes that the downtown community pursues.

Sears came on board last fall, and has been busy connecting with the divergent groups who have an interest, sometimes competing, in the city's downtown.

The constituents of downtown are many: residents, landlords and tenants; business owners, the Chamber of Commerce and their customers; pedestrians and motorists; the city's active recreation department and the children and families who benefit; state government, the court system and all their clients; tourists and the locals who fish off the bridges; and everyone who works in the city from across the region.

Her "big picture" approach is to build on downtown's assets, not just list the city's problems.

"We need to understand that Main Street is our gateway. It's not only economic but it's community development," Sears said.

She wants to know how those that are required to live or walk in downtown to be near government services and those who serve them can find common ground with the retail community. It shouldn't be local businesses pitted against local residents, she said.

"How can we partner in taking part in the pride of our Main Street?" she said.

Her job is to open communication and connections among all the groups that use Main Street.

"I want us to be planning into the 21st century," she said.

Her inspiration is Magog, Quebec, on the north end of international Lake Memphremagog. Thirty or 40 years ago, Magog was an industrial town that hadn't tapped into the waterfront resource it now uses to attract thousands from the Montreal area. Its waterfront is accessible, with tour boats and festivals. Its downtown is alive in the summer with activity.

Goal: A Busy Downtown

"My goal is to have downtown Newport as busy as Magog on weekends," Sears said.

As a historic place recognized by the National Register of the National Park Service, downtown building owners can qualify for more assistance to maintain their distinct history.

Sears also will connect with experts who have "found" Newport City to tap their knowledge of how other communities have blossomed. She also wants to talk to those who worked in the Newport of yesteryear, on the railroad, for example.

She would also like to help promote the proposed tour boat by a local couple, which could be up and operating this summer.

Developers can make money here, and those wanting to leave a legacy behind will find ways to invest here, Sears said. She is meeting with as many people who have something to give to the city as she can, bringing them together for the city.

The meeting on Jan. 24 is the first chance for Sears, assisted by Joss Besse of the Vermont Downtown Program, to unveil what it takes to become a designated downtown.