

Innovation in Rutland

Environmental Studies Senior Seminar (ENVS 0401 A) Spring 2014 Project Statements

Introduction:

Themes of inquiry for all sections of the Environmental Studies Senior Seminar this academic year have been linked to questions about Vermont's environmental future, using Elizabeth Courtney and Eric Zencey's book, Greening Vermont: The Search for a Sustainable State as a springboard. These themes include: How will we feed ourselves? How will we secure the energy to power our lives? How will we develop resilience to a changing climate? How will we manage growth to keep our forests intact? and How will we measure well-being (links to genuine progress indicator)?

Elizabeth, Vic Guadagno of Bright Blue EcoMedia and Greg Sharrow of the Vermont Folklife Center have been working with all of the 401 project teams this year and they hope any student work related to these themes can provide the initial content for their proposed on-line journal that aims to achieve the below outcome:

"The documentation and distribution of the stories of transition will enable broader collaboration among citizens and increase replication. The primary outcome of this body of work is to connect with people through film and other media and motivate them to seek collaborative opportunities that will create the building blocks of a new, sustainable economy, a healthy environment and resilient communities."

We are excited about the opportunity for you to engage several of these themes with community partners in the Rutland region—you will learn quite a bit from them as they have shown great leadership on a diverse array of initiatives. Further, this is an opportunity for you to be exposed to the challenges and complexity of environmental work in a diverse community.

From our meetings with community leaders in Rutland, the overarching needs expressed were:

- How to get more engagement on a range of issues from a broader cross-section of the community
- How to grapple with differences in perception / experience by the range of community members (e.g. negative self-image, "two-cities" experience)
- How can we all hear each other and move forward in positive ways that will really impact people's lives

The organizations and initiatives you will be connecting with include the Mayor's Office for the City of Rutland, Sustainable Rutland, Rutland Young Professionals, Restoring Rutland, Rutland Creative Economy, the Rutland Area Food and Farm Link, Vermont Farmers Food Center, The Carving Studio, and Green Mountain Power's Energy Innovation Center.

Many of the leaders of these organizations will be joining us in our lab session this Thursday, February 13th to discuss the below-listed project ideas and we will collectively move from these ideas to a clear set of project objectives.

1. Community Engagement Around Food

Rutland Area Farm and Food Link (RAFFL) (www.rutlandfarmandfood.org) , Tara Kelly

Assumptions:

- 1) The Council on the Future of VT says 98% of Vermonters value the working landscape
- 2) RAFFL and others around the state—including the Farm to Plate Network—have determined that one strategy for ensuring the future of the working landscape is to work on the economic viability of local farms
- 3) One of the major ways RAFFL has done this over the years is to influence more people to purchase foods and other products from local farmers.

Problem:

We (RAFFL) know that our message is not connecting with everyone. And, we suspect it is not reaching many natural allies, simply because of the way we express the message. We talk about the farm-to-plate effort in a way that has some people think "not for me". We are missing an opportunity to broaden the umbrella of people. We are (unintentionally) feeding into a divide in our society. If this divide widens, we run the risk of failing in our mission which includes serving the community's best long-term interests.

Idea:

Middlebury College students could help by interviewing a range of people about how they use local food sources and how/if they see themselves as being involved in the "local food" scene.

Example questions for background:

Were you raised on a farm?

How do you define "farm"?

Do you produce any of your own food ingredients (garden, raise animals, put up foods).

Do you get any of your food locally? (hunt, barter, purchase from neighbors, purchase from farmers)

Example questions about their interaction with the local food scene:

When you hear "Local Food" what do you think of?

Do you ever shop at the farmers market? Why/why not?

Have you ever seen/used the Locally Grown Guide? How / Why not?

Here's an article that appeared in the Rutland Herald (one of our Harvest Watch articles). What are your thoughts on this topic?

What advice would you give a young family member or neighbor about how to feed their family well?

These are not well-formed. But, I hope they give you an idea about what I'm after. I would hope that we would get good data, plus good stories. The good stories would help to expand the types of voices expressing support. It could be highlighted in many ways with the person's permission -- including profiles in our weekly Rutland Herald column and/or interviews on the local cable access station.

The information will inform our work at RAFFL. And, I serve on the Steering Committee of the Vermont Farm to Plate Network. Lessons learned from this project will be shared with colleagues statewide.

Note: Further conversation with Greg Cox of the Vermont Farmers Food Center will allow us to identify how these or complimentary questions can assist their efforts as well.

(<http://vermontfarmersfoodcenter.wordpress.com/>)

2. Community Engagement Around Energy

Green Mountain Power Energy Innovation Center, John Tedesco

(<http://www.greenmountainpower.com/innovative/innovation/>)

Green Mountain Power is one of Vermont's electric utilities, and their mission is to, "provide its customers with a balance of the most reliable, affordable, smart, and clean electricity, in an effort to be the best small utility in America." GMP recently opened their Energy Innovation Center (EIC) in downtown Rutland with the goal of being a hub for collaborative and creative projects that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of energy use and promote the economic vitality of the region.

EIC initiatives and pilot programs are in the areas of solar, wind, hydropower, cow power, electric vehicles, and most recently, cold climate heat pumps. Cold climate air source heat pumps represent a very high efficiency and low operational cost option for home heating and cooling. The EIC's pilot program around these heat pumps was in the form of a rental program for a small monthly fee, and they are looking to take the program to the next level. Preliminary research questions are in the areas of market research to identify strategies for connecting with new sectors of the community, profiling successes, and identify the challenges of expansion.

Similar to the food project, an overarching goal of this project can be to help foster broader community engagement around the range renewables by exploring people's interaction with and relationship too alternative energy options.

3. Community Asset Mapping

Mayor's Office, City of Rutland (<http://www.rutlandcity.org/>)

This project will build off of the work of a project team from the Fall 2013 environmental studies senior seminar to build a community asset map for the Rutland region. The Fall 2013 project (available at: <http://teamresilience.wix.com/team-resilience>) was a first step in mapping how different individuals and organizations in the state were collaborating around the theme of resilience (if at all), what topic area(s) they were collaborating on, and categorizing the level of the collaboration (e.g. connected at a meeting, completed an action together, or have an ongoing partnership).

One example of the many benefits of this type of mapping work is that it helps identify gaps that represent opportunities for effective collaboration and deeper community impacts. If you consider that a range of connections across organizational sectors, jurisdictions, and disciplines are needed to tackle the challenges of developing resilience to climate change for communities across the state of Vermont, then identifying these opportunities becomes even more important.

In light of the two FEMA federal disaster declarations Rutland has received since 2007, mapping Rutland's community resources will be quite valuable for enhancing their community resiliency in light of potential future climate change disruptions. Experiences from these two events highlighted some gaps, but not in a comprehensive way. Based on these experiences, it is important to the City that your mapping strives to differentiate between organizations and individuals that have proven resources and on the ground experience vs. those that say they can do something but don't yet have an established track record.

4. Story of How Rutland is a Model / Can be a Model for New Economy Work

Elizabeth Courtney (Greening Vermont author, <http://greeningvermont.com/>), Vic Guadagno (Bright Blue EcoMedia, <http://brightbluemedia.org/>), and Greg Sharrow (Vermont Folklife Center, <http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/>)

As noted in the introduction, the above-listed partners are working at the state level to document and distribute stories of transition that will enable broader collaboration among citizens and increase replication. There are two main goals of this body of work and they are to 1) connect with people through film and other media and motivate them to seek collaborative opportunities that will create the building blocks of a new, sustainable economy, a healthy environment and resilient communities, and 2) to foster an understanding of how the environmental movement must address the underlying economic problems of the 21st century and enable broader participation in an emerging economy that supports a healthy environment and resilient communities.

There are many stories of transition and innovation in Rutland that would be fabulous to showcase for the rest of Vermont and the goal of this project team will be to begin to tell those stories. These stories can—and should—include the food, energy, and resilience innovations that the other groups will be bringing to light, but will also more fully explore Rutland’s Creative Economy and Sustainable Rutland Initiatives as well as other initiatives we begin to identify in Thursday’s session with our partners.

This project also offers the opportunity to explore the theme of well-being as discussed in Greening Vermont. There are many different scales for considering well-being – from the individual up through state-level Genuine Progress Indicators (GPI) as discussed in Greening Vermont. What measures of well-being resonate with the Rutland community? Elizabeth, Vic, and Greg’s work and the “new economy” goals they want to create a statewide dialog around are strongly based in GPI theory. This project will also afford the opportunity for a constructive critique of what GPI can achieve.