

Building a Better Brattleboro's Accomplishments

Building a Better Brattleboro's mission is to support and nurture the economic, cultural, residential and educational environment of the Town of Brattleboro with primary emphasis on downtown. A thriving downtown will serve the goals of the entire community.

The financial benefits of Brattleboro's designated downtown status total

\$3,148,148

as of March 2005, excluding pending projects. These benefits have been made possible through the participation of Building a Better Brattleboro ("BaBB")¹.

Accomplishments 2004

Overview

Rebuilding has been the theme for Building a Better Brattleboro's work this year. At the annual meeting, the membership recommitted to the model of the National Main Street Program. BaBB has undertaken the task of supporting the ongoing vitality of Downtown with a revitalized committee structure. BaBB has also focused on resolving some of the longstanding issues, such as construction of the park at the corner of Main and High Street, the ongoing challenge of the River Garden usage, and the creation of a special assessment district, known as the Downtown Improvement District.

Design Initiatives

- Construction of the park at the corner of Main and High Street was anticipated for 2004. The proposal was put out to bid late in the construction season and came back substantially over budget. The committee worked with the designer to substantially reduce the cost of construct, re-issued the request for bids, and accepted a bid within the budget. The committee has been negotiating with the Timber Framers' Guild on a volunteer project to build the bus shelter, which will provide a higher quality structure with the added benefit of increased community involvement.
- Naming the park was a challenge in itself. After several attempts to find a name acceptable to the community and the Emergency-911 naming conventions, the committee finally decided as the public to suggest names and have an independent panel of judges make the final recommendation to the Selectboard. As a result of this process, BaBB has proposed the name "Pliny Park" to honor Pliny Burrows' contribution to the Town.
- The Design Committee advanced in its discussion of development of the waterfront at the southern edge of the designated downtown district. It has explored various alternatives for development that maximize the value to the Town, the property owners, and the general public. The discussion includes significant property owners in the area, staff from

¹ Report prepared by the Town of Brattleboro for the 2005 representative Town Meeting.

the Town's Planning Services Department, and representatives from other organizations. The outcome will be a recommendation to the Town regarding changes to the Town Plan and Zoning that would encourage higher value development.

- The Robert H. Gibson River Garden remains a significant project for BaBB, and absorbs a significant portion of the organization's resources. Through implementation of a clear set of policies for users, and improved management and maintenance structure, and capital investment in the roof and a failed sewer line, the usefulness of the facility greatly increased while the net loss from its operations has been reduced. In June 2004 BaBB convened a group of stakeholders for a full day meeting to discuss the future of the River Garden. The group expressed a strong preference for maintaining the River Garden as a public resource. BaBB intends to resolve this issue during the coming year.

Economic Restructuring Initiatives

- This committee was reconstituted with a new chair and members. Education and setting the direction for the committee have been significant activities.
- The group is working to revise to BaBB's recruitment package with a target completion date of June 2005. This is a significant undertaking of great value to both our organization and others in the area.
- The BaBB office continues to respond to requests for information on potential business support and locations within the Downtown. It has coordinated with the Vermont Small Business Development Center and the SEVCA Microbusiness Development Center to provide educational and technical support to several new and existing businesses in the area.

Promotion and Marketing Initiatives

- The *Downtown Brattleboro Directory & Map* was updated and revised. This was a substantial effort on the part of volunteers and staff. 5,000 copies have already been distributed by staff, volunteers and through a distribution contract. Another 5,000 will be printed in the near term and the Guilford Welcome center will be added as a distribution point.
- The Committee has expanded to include broad representation, including merchants, marketing professionals, media, and the hospitality industry. It is co-chaired by two individuals who are not members of the board, draws on outside resources as necessary, and is developing into an effective working group.
- Events this year included:
 1. Tropical Village Days – In cooperation with the River Valley Credit Union, BaBB hosted a daylong Battle of the Bands in the Harmony Parking Lot which featured local food vendors. An estimated 1,500 people or more participated in the event, while others shopped for bargains at the merchants' sidewalk sales.
 2. Key Into Jazz – Sponsored by Key Bank and the New Automall, this series of three Latin Jazz concerts drew approximately 200 people to each event.
 3. Decemberfest – A major effort for the committee and staff, this month long celebration of Brattleboro in winter was coordinated again with the Chamber of Commerce's Holly Days, and brought activity to the street.
- The Promotion Committee has met jointly with the Organization Committee to develop both a BaBB brand and image and a Downtown brand and image. These essential tools

for ensuring the ongoing success of the organization and the Downtown will be refined during the coming year.

Organizational Initiatives

- The most significant project of 2004 was the campaign to create a Special Assessment District as authorized by Vermont law. Planning for this multifaceted campaign began early in the year. Implementation required significant research, the creation of a special committee that met regularly to keep the project on task, and participation by board members at key junctures. The March 2005 Town Meeting overwhelmingly authorized creation of the District. Through the second quarter of the year BaBB will be working closely with Town administration to design the mechanism for implementing what is known as the “Downtown Improvement District (DID).”
- As a result of the recommitment to the National Main Street program at the 2004 membership meeting, the Board formed an Organization Committee. This committee has been active in reviewing the structure of the organization and advising the staff with regard to policy decisions. It will play a significant role in creating the DID implementation structure.
- In October staff from the Vermont Downtown Program assessed BaBB’s participation in the program. While the official notification is still pending, the assessment highlighted opportunities for increased communication and cooperation within the organization that have already been implemented.

Accomplishments 2003

Economic Development Initiatives

- BaBB completed the Sprinkler Program, assisting four property owners with the installation of sprinklers to protect key downtown buildings.
- BaBB continues to field calls from individuals interested in opening businesses in downtown Brattleboro, showing them space and arranging meetings for them with property owners. BaBB’s success is evidenced by downtown Brattleboro’s low vacancy rate.
- The Thai Garden opened in December of 2003. Part of the revitalization effort for the Main Street Plaza, on the corner of Main and High Streets, this restaurant occupies a newly constructed building.

Marketing Initiatives

- During this period the *Strolling of the Heifers* became a separate 501(c)(3) with BaBB support. The second annual event in June of 2003 exceeded organizers’ expectation for attendance.
- The *Key into Jazz* series of three monthly concerts played to standing room only audiences.
- *DecemberFest* events and decoration exceeded the effort of previous years. A full calendar of cultural events culminated with Last Night activities in many venues. With assistance from the Chamber of Commerce, Sam’s Outfitter’s, and Entergy BaBB provided decorative illumination in trees from one end of Main Street to the other, in the Harmony Lot, and in

Plaza Park. In addition, BaBB provided candle lights for the windows of downtown businesses and residences and arranged for a community tree lighting at the Main Street Plaza, greatly increasing the downtown's festive appearance during the season.

- The summer and fall of 2003 were particularly difficult times for downtown businesses. Extensive construction on the bridge at the lower end of Main Street and the Brattleboro Transportation Center resulted in disrupted traffic patterns and parking facilities. BaBB took the initiative, and working with the Town and the Chamber of Commerce, strove to mitigate the adverse effects on downtown business. Through advertising, press releases, and the funding of musical events, BaBB encouraged the public to visit downtown often. As part of its promotion effort, BaBB capitalized on the opportunity offered by adversity with an innovative and humorous campaign. BaBB purchased and distributed to downtown shoppers thousands of decorative hardhats emblazoned with the words, "We're building a better Brattleboro."

Design/Beautification Initiatives

- The final design for Main Street Plaza, at the corner of Main & High Streets, was approved. Completion of the park, and acceptance by the Town, is anticipated for the Fall of 2004.
- The River Garden continues to be popular with the public. It hosted more events in 2003 than in the previous year, and was home to several fledgling business ventures. During a series of deliberations in the summer of 2003 the Board determined to seek long-term tenant(s) while preserving a majority of the space for public access. This effort has not been successful so far.
- The Downtown Façade Improvement program was completed in 2003. The façades of nine historic buildings have been rehabilitated by their owners. The Town provided incentives by a \$150,000 grant secured by BaBB efforts.
- The advisory *Design Guidelines for Downtown Brattleboro* were completed and distributed by BaBB's Design Committee. They are available in hard copy at the Town and BaBB offices. The *Guidelines* are a useful resource for the Town of Brattleboro's Planning Services Division, the Windham Regional Commission, architects and property-owners.
- BaBB organized and funded downtown beautification as in past years with sap buckets planted with flowers attached to parking meters. Local school children participated in this community-building program.

Organizational Initiatives

BaBB's first executive director left at the end of 2002. A successor was not hired until December of 2003. BaBB's Board and Committees successfully maintained momentum of the organization during this period.

Accomplishments During 2001/2002

Economic Development Initiatives

- BABB is administering a Sprinkler Program that is assisting four property owners with installation of sprinklers in their downtown buildings. BABB wrote a successful grant to

fund this grant/match program. It is expected to leverage about \$90,000 in private investment.

- BABB continues to field calls from individuals interested in opening businesses in downtown Brattleboro, showing them space and arranging meetings for them with property owners.

Economic Development and Marketing Initiatives

- Commercial property owners were brought together to consider partnering on cooperative advertising of upper floor office space in downtown, including the Marlboro Graduate Center, which is also a downtown landlord. The property owners agreed to join together in this effort. The first two ads appeared in the Summer 2002 edition of Vermont Life and in a special supplement to Interface Tech News.
- The business recruitment package, completed several months ago, is provided to those who express an interest in opening a business in Brattleboro. A postcard has been developed to send out in mailings to technology and communications companies and others to try to interest them in Brattleboro. Those who respond are sent a recruitment package.
- The downtown Brattleboro web site (brattleborovt.org) is up and running, with additional information being added all the time. Each month, vacant commercial and industrial properties in downtown, on Putney Road, on Canal Street and in West Brattleboro are updated. Property owners can email this information to BABB by going to the blank form found at brattleborovt.org/inventoryform.html, filling it out and clicking on the submit button. The Trust Company of Vermont is kindly doing the inventory updates for the website.
- Main Street Plaza (Former Dunkin Donuts Property)
 1. BABB has partnered with the Brattleboro Area Community Land Trust to develop a plaza/park on the former Dunkin Donuts site. A team of landscape designers and engineers are at work designing the plaza. Two public meetings were held to gain community input on the project's design.
 2. A closing on the back portion of the lot was completed in July 2002 with an entity that will rehabilitate the building to house a restaurant overlooking the plaza.
 3. Completion of the plaza is expected in the summer of 2003, at which time it will be gifted to the Town of Brattleboro.
- BABB helped to develop, plan and implement the first annual Strolling of the Heifers event. It was a tremendous success.
- An ever-increasing number of events have been held at the Robert H. Gibson River Garden. Some of these include the Heifer Ball, monthly art exhibits that are part of Gallery Walk, press conferences, legislative bill signing ceremonies, Argentine Tango classes and dances, memorial services, concerts (including Key Into Latin Jazz), book signings and puppet shows.

Design/Beautification

- The downtown Façade Improvement Program continues to move along. Five building facades have undergone rehabilitation and are now completed -- Hooker-Dunham (143-145 Main St.), Shin-La (57-61 Main St.), Van Dorn (51 Main St.), 57 Elliot St., and 115-23 Elliot St. -- with three others to follow. In all, nine downtown historic building facades will be rehabilitated. This program resulted from \$150,000 in grants that BABB was successful in garnering for downtown Brattleboro. The program is expected to leverage \$129,500 in private investment.

- Advisory Design Guidelines for Downtown Brattleboro have been completed. Two public meetings were held prior to and after the first draft was developed. A third public meeting will be held to review the final document with the public and explain how it can be used. The Design Guidelines are intended as a tool for property and business owners, contractors and design professionals faced with making decisions about building repairs, maintenance and rehabilitation as well as additions and new construction in the downtown.
- BABB was a member of the Town Lighting Committee that researched and presented recommendations to the Selectboard on new downtown streetlights. Those fixtures have already been installed on Elliot Street and in the High Grove Parking Lot. They will be installed on Main Street when the Main Street Reconstruction project gets underway.
- For the third year, BABB funded and organized sap buckets being hung from downtown parking meters with spring flowers. Several master gardeners with assistance from local children planted all of the flowers.

Accomplishments During 2000/2001

Economic Development Initiatives

- Robert H. Gibson River Garden
 1. Completed construction of the Robert H. Gibson River Garden in the heart of downtown Brattleboro, a garden atrium with public bathrooms and a terrace overlooking the Connecticut River. Raised \$723,000 in state and federal funding for its construction.
 2. BABB now manages the River Garden as a downtown gathering place offering food and drink, concerts, art exhibits and other events for the public's enjoyment.
 - As a small business incubator, the River Garden made it possible for three new businesses to start up in downtown.
 - The walls of the River Garden serve as gallery space, hosting a new art exhibit each month.
 - The River Garden provides events such as concerts, recitals, puppet shows, poetry readings, dance classes and workshops.
 - Local non-profits are given an opportunity to have displays at the River Garden as a means to better educate the public about their services.
- Former Dunkin Donuts Property
 1. BABB has purchased the Dunkin Donuts site in order to ensure that its redevelopment will have a positive impact on downtown. The plan is to create a public park/plaza on the front portion of the site for the enjoyment of visitors, shoppers and area residents. Three grant applications were submitted to fund most of the costs of acquisition, design and construction, and all have been successful, providing a total of \$378,000. BABB is partnering with the Brattleboro Area Community Land Trust to develop this project. The town has agreed to accept the park as a gift from BABB once it is completed, and will maintain it as a town park.
 2. BABB's negotiations have recently resulted in a purchase and sale agreement with a private developer who wishes to purchase the back portion of the site. A closing is expected in April or May. The developer will rehabilitate the existing building and open a new downtown business. That portion of the property will remain on the grand list, contributing to the tax base in Brattleboro.

3. Facilitated placing a 30 foot balsam tree on the site during December, decorated it and hosted a tree-lighting ceremony for the community. This launched the holiday season and the beginning of DecemberFest 2000 and 2001 in Brattleboro. BABB partnered on this project with Cersosimo Lumber who donated the trees both years.
 3. Worked with the Fire Department to create a Firefighters Museum in the former Dunkin Donuts building (as a temporary use).
- Recruited Letamaya to downtown, a restaurant serving natural and organic foods with a Japanese orientation. They have now been open for business at 51 Main Street for about six months.
 - Assisted several new businesses in their efforts to locate their shops in vacant downtown spaces, including the Twilight Tea Lounge, Dragonfly Dry Goods, Amy's Bakery Arts Café and Gallery In The Woods.
 - Developed a "how to" brochure *Opening A Restaurant in Brattleboro*.
 - Publish *Downtown Shop Talk*, a newsletter for downtown merchants.
 - Host a monthly forum for downtown merchants to exchange information and ideas. Meetings are held at the River Garden on the second Wednesday of each month
 - Just completed a recruitment package to be used as a tool for recruiting new businesses to Brattleboro. This package is a useful resource for building owners, the Chamber of Commerce, BDCC, BABB, realtors and any other entities engaged in business recruitment.

Marketing/Promotion

- Completed a Strategic Marketing Plan for downtown in April of 2001, in partnership with the Brattleboro Arts Initiative (BAI) and the Town of Brattleboro. Implementation of the Plan is underway, in cooperation with BAI, the Town and the Chamber of Commerce.
- Developed a downtown logo to strengthen the image and identity of downtown. It will be used on brochures, banners, event posters, advertising and other promotional materials.
- In the process of developing a banner program for downtown to enhance its visual appeal and create a greater sense of liveliness on Main Street.
- Created a downtown brochure with a map and listings of all retailers and restaurants/cafes. The brochure assists visitors to Brattleboro and is the first promotional tool to use the downtown logo.
- Organized the lighting of the Main Street trees (with thousands of small white lights) for the 2000 and 2001 holiday seasons.

Special Events

Spearheaded events planning to promote Brattleboro and attract increased numbers of people to the downtown area.

- Partnered with the Preservation Trust of Vermont to organize and host (for the first time) in Brattleboro, the Seventh Annual Vermont Historic Preservation Conference. The conference was a great success and was attended by several hundred people from all over the State.
- Launched "DecemberFest" in 2000 and 2001, a month-long series of seasonal events in downtown, including concerts, live theater, music, poetry, choral performances, caroling and craft fairs.

- Created “Key Into Jazz,” a jazz concert series held at the River Garden. The series kicked off in June and ran through October, 2001. BABB partnered with KeyBank (sponsor) and the Vermont Jazz Center on this project.
- Organized Tropical Village Days with downtown merchants for two years running. This is the once a year sidewalk sale for the downtown shops. It also features sidewalk music performances.
- Organized Book Night to help promote the five independent downtown bookstores.

Design/Beautification

Façade Improvement Program

- Developed the Façade Improvement Program to assist downtown property owners with rehabilitating their historic building. Secured \$150,000 from the State Reinvestment Fund to enable ten property owners to restore the architectural and historic integrity of their building facades.
- Worked with nine local architects to develop drawings for the restoration of these ten downtown buildings.
- BABB is now administering the program. All projects are expected to be completed by December 2002.

Additional Design/Beautification Projects

- Wrote and received a planning grant for \$15,000, to which BABB added \$5,000, to develop advisory Design Guidelines for the designated downtown. Two public workshops have been incorporated into this project to access the community’s ideas. The expected completion date is June 2002.
- In partnership with the Town, BABB worked with the Vermont Agency of Transportation on designs for the reconstruction of the Main Street Bridge over the Whetstone Brook. The bridge will have period lighting, restored historic railings and an embellished surface.
- BABB is a member of the Committee that is providing input on the reconstruction of Main Street.

Accomplishments During 1998-1999

Organization

- Established BABB as a 501c3 non-profit organization.
- Developed a board of directors.
- Sought and received financial investments from the business community and individuals that provided funds to operate BABB for three years.
- Completed the process of hiring an executive director.

Economic Development

- Purchased the Rite-Aid Building for redevelopment into the Robert H. Gibson River Garden. BABB raised federal and state grants to help fund its purchase and construction.

- Organized four committees -- economic restructuring, design, marketing/promotion and organization – focused on furthering the revitalization of downtown.
- Assisted the Town in its successful efforts to receive downtown designation status that entitles Brattleboro to receive state grant funds for downtown projects. The designation entitles Brattleboro to secure the state funding commitment for the Transportation Center.
- BABB was designated as the downtown revitalization organization for the Town of Brattleboro.

Beautification

- Landscaped the Dunkin Donuts site with sod, benches and a sculpture for the community's enjoyment until a solution can be found for redeveloping the site in a manner that enhances downtown.
- Flowers were incorporated into Main Street in sap buckets (attached to parking meters) and benches were placed in various locations along Main Street.