

The Innovative Inspiration Behind Rutland's Evolving Makeover

By Kevin Lambert

What makes a place what it is? Not just any place, but a good place? Somewhere people recognize, think about, talk about, hope for, travel through, travel to, work in, and live in?

If cornered into summing it up with one sentence, community development guru Lisa Glover thinks of placemaking as “people-powered public-space design.” This wonderfully alliterative definition references the emergent, grass-roots character underscoring a rebuild of the 21st century downtown in some of the country's more communally cohesive rural areas. A self-employed consultant, Glover is formerly of the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI), a nonprofit that has worked with the USDA to establish and cultivate an Innovation District in Downtown Rutland, VT.



Depot Park, once the site of social turmoil, is now where friends and families gather to enjoy food, music and the company of neighbors, courtesy of organizations like Come Alive Outside

In September 2023, through the Rutland Economic Development Corporation, CORI received a \$50,000 USDA Community Facilities grant to purchase equipment for the Hub CoWorks, a digital-economy incubator and accelerator that offers training to help residents explore careers in IT. The grant bought smartboards, wireless access points, laptops, monitors, cameras and microphones. CORI, which had performed a Digital Economy Ecosystem Assessment for the Hub, identified a high concentration of people in the area with broadband access and computer-science backgrounds but few avenues for career development. With the upgraded equipment, more services and speed are available to the local workforce, resulting in more high-paying, high-demand, tech-focused jobs.

In the world of active placemaking, laptops and cameras for one group can be rakes and shovels for another. Depot Park in Rutland is a green area between the city's Innovation District and a store parking lot, and in previous years had been a site of contention and social turmoil, with city officials electing to remove benches to discourage the area's use. But recently, the Park has reawakened to its potential, benefitting from concentrated community focus on the reimagining of public spaces. Funding through grants and capital campaigns, courtesy of nonprofits Come Alive Outside and the Rutland Garden Club, have secured playground equipment, outdoor games, garden space, and a community study to gather feedback on further improvements for the reinvigorated public area.

Though perhaps not an intuitive aspect of placemaking, transportation is as integral to defining an area's character as art, music and food. Getting *to* the place and *through* the place as a pedestrian, biker or driver is the initial act of being *in* the place as a tourist, resident or worker. Center Street in Rutland is the main thoroughfare of the Downtown Innovation District, and during the COVID pandemic, the city tested bump-outs that created more space for pedestrians by better-defining traffic movements and speed. A



The mid-block crosswalk between Wonderfeet Kid's Museum and the Hub CoWorks, with a proposed streetscaping outline in color contrast. In response to public suggestions, Innovation District leaders tried out new surface-transportation ideas during the COVID pandemic

resulting feasibility study concluded that residents wanted a permanent change, and the city is currently working with business owners, visitors and residents to envision the best streetscaping design for all.

Mixed-use buildings, with businesses downstairs and residences above, are an essential component of smart economic development. CORI has determined that 300 additional people could call Downtown Rutland home if underutilized upper floors were converted to living spaces. This influx would

support new restaurants, retail businesses and services, and add dozens of new members to the Hub's roster. If the city established a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District, it could then authorize municipal bonds to finance improvement projects and new construction with less taxpayer burden than the conventional municipal process. With new infrastructure for housing, the area would become more attractive to small businesses, creating a more stable and vibrant downtown economy—and the anticipated tax revenue to fill in the TIF gap of red ink.

Help in economic development offered from national nonprofits and the federal government can sometimes provoke resentment among locals who want to run on the steam of the state and work exclusively with familiar faces. Not so in Rutland, which features leaders who are intent on engaging resources far and wide for ideas, inspiration and working capital. “We are so grateful for the support provided by the USDA and CORI,” says Lyle Jepson, Executive Director of the Chamber & Economic Development of the Rutland Region, or CEDRR. “We are traveling an exciting and positive economic journey that highlights the importance of the people who call our region their forever home. The support we have received, and continue to receive, from these two partners and others has been the catalyst for inspiring proactive, positive change.”

Though her work is national in scope, Glover has a soft spot for Marble City, a town with many challenges but also a solid core of diehard community-development advocates, public servants, and volunteers. “Rutland has a special place in my heart,” she says. “It emulates the idea I have of what it takes to make a place your own as a community. People most local to where changes are being considered are thoroughly involved in the building of those changes. This encourages community connection and economic resilience while reducing project costs and the likelihood of making mistakes. Rutland is on the right path, giving those who are affected the most what they need to live well in their space.”