

Who does Newport belong to?

by Joseph Gresser

NEWPORT — About 35 Newport residents, and a few folks from out of town, spent two hours Thursday evening, September 27, thinking about the pluses and minuses of their city. The meeting, sponsored by the Newport Community Justice Center and the Newport City Renaissance Corporation, was titled “The Downtown Puzzle: Who Does Newport Belong To?”

That title was itself an early target of criticism when Pam Ladds, a Newport resident who described herself as one of the 99 percent, who termed it “grammatically an atrocity.”

“It got you here, though,” shot back Amy Shollenberger, who coordinated the meeting.

Ms. Ladds, like most of those who turned out for the meeting, said she was interested in discussing Newport’s future.

Newport resident Anne Chiarello said, “I’m here because of the question of belonging, who does Newport belong to? I wanted to be sure Newport belongs to all the citizens, including the poor citizens of this city, and that they get a voice.”

Walter Medwid, who works at the Community Justice Center said, “I can see, sense, taste the infinite possibilities that this little city has and hoping the sparks will arrive to ignite all the possibilities of growing this wonderful little city.”

Another resident, Therese Mosley agreed with Mr. Medwid, “It can be a beautiful community for shopping, families, and the rest. But I’m concerned about the economic situation with families. The disparities with money and employment in this town is so great

I hope something can spark from this meeting.”

Social worker Charlie Sullivan said he attended the meeting because he heard comments from his clients suggesting that they feel unwelcome in Newport.

State Representative Duncan Kilmartin said he thought it important to attend the meeting because of the announcement of plans to redevelop the city announced at Jay Peak earlier in the day.

After hearing comments from most of the people who attended the meeting, Ms. Shollenberger led the group in a series of brainstorming exercises.

One product of the exercises was a chart listing things that most of those present thought the city should keep doing, should stop doing and should start doing.

The consensus on the first item was overwhelmingly in favor of continuing to seek sustainable economic growth in the city.

Likewise, there was wide agreement that the city ought to start finding ways to get citizens involved in improving Newport.

The list of things that should be stopped was more diverse, with participants suggesting people should stop “fussing about people who come out of apartments on Main Street,” and quit polluting the lake. One group of people even advised the city to cease having a lack of tax base.

Interestingly, the suggestions that the group came up with dovetailed neatly with those put forward by a group of students in the Newport branch of the Community High School of Vermont, an educational project of the Department of Probation and Parole.

Harmony Harriman, who



A group of Newport residents tries to find a consensus on goals for the city. The group, who were participants in a planning meeting held at the Emory Hebard State Office Building Thursday, September 27, included from left to right Alderman John Wilson, Ann Creaven, Thadd Beebe, Patricia Sears, director of the Newport City Renaissance Corporation, Isobel Marks, and state Representative Duncan Kilmartin. Photo by Joseph Gresser

teaches in the Newport branch, which is the only one not located in a prison, put up a display of materials put together by her students.

Their values included jobs, recreation, safe affordable housing and places for children, all issues raised in the brainstorming sessions.

Before dismissing the group, Ms. Shollenberger asked people about their reactions to the session.

Most were pleased with the evening’s discussion, and many asked how the work will be carried forward, and wondered if it might be possible to convene more such meetings.

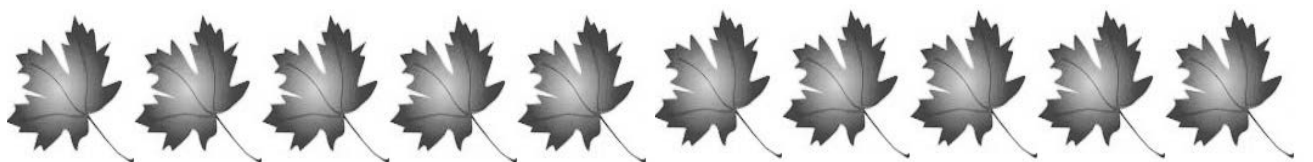
Mr. Sullivan regretted the lack of young people in the mix of participants, while Ms. Ladds suggested that a next step might be


for more people to attend city council meetings to keep track of the doings of government.

Diane Peel suggested that the simplest way to proceed would be for people to get a couple of neighbors together, have some pizza or beer, and start a project. Something as simple as planting flowers on a street corner could eventually grow into a larger community endeavor, she said.

Representative Kilmartin seemed to sum up the general feeling of the meeting when he said it is important to build trust between diverse groups in a community.

“Trust doesn’t come in sound bites. It comes from spending time together,” he said.





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