

7 Ways to Create Better Places

Vermont is home to stunning natural beauty coupled with towns and villages full of local character, charm, and vibrancy. The real force that makes our communities sing is their people. Vermonters are creative, resourceful, and passionate about lifting up and celebrating their towns. Thanks to a new grant program called **Better Places**, the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development is providing tools to support community members in creating projects that add vitality to Vermont's villages and downtowns.

The program supports community-led projects that create, revitalize, or activate public spaces, bringing people together to build welcoming and thriving communities across Vermont. How? By providing one-on-one project coaching, local fundraising support, and two to one (2:1) matching grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$40,000 to make community-led placemaking ideas happen.

So far, 38 local projects have been supported and over \$473,000 has been crowdfunded from over 3,200 donors—that's a lot of support for creating great places!

Better Places is about uplifting and building community, not just implementing projects. Let's take a tour of our brave little state's newest public spaces.

About Better Places

Better Places is a community matching grant program empowering Vermonters to create inclusive and vibrant public places serving Vermont's. The program is led by the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development in partnership with the Vermont Department of Health, the Vermont Community Foundation, and Patronicity, our crowdfunding experts. The program supports community-led projects that create, revitalize, or activate community gathering areas that bring people together to build welcoming and thriving communities across Vermont.

To learn more about Better Places, please [visit the program site here](#).

Thanks to Better Places, Vermont is...

1. A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE, TOGETHER

Better Places is bringing community connection and a renewed sense of belonging to Vermont communities small and large.

In White River Junction, Junction Arts & Media (JAM) turned an empty storefront into a free, public media arts "playground" where community comes together through the arts. Experiences at the new community space include video art installations, community art activities, media arts workshops, live performances, activism, and pop-up outdoor film and music events.

"I can't tell you how transformative this experience has been and how I toot the horn of Better Places and the advantages of crowdfunding on the front end to convey the vision and recruit community involvement,"

said Samantha Davidson Green, Executive Director of JAM.



2. A PLACE THAT INSPIRES

Bennington was one of the first communities to launch a Better Places campaign in spring 2022. “Better Bennington Thursday Night Live!”, an effort to reinvigorate community life with free diverse entertainment, was a smashing success: over the summer, the Better Bennington Corporation hosted 18 live performances that included a variety of diverse music, spoken word, storytelling, a drumming circle, and a dance party to close out the season.

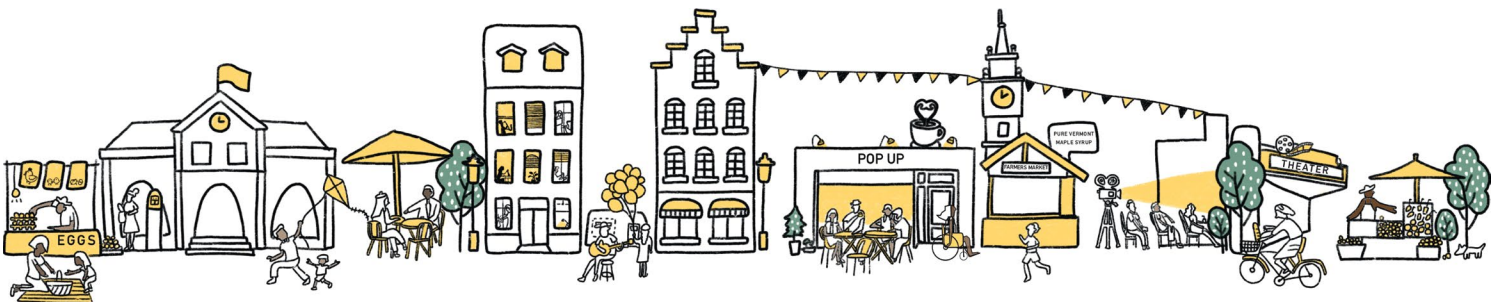
“Thursday Night Live provided a wonderful opportunity for the community to come together and enjoy a huge variety of high-quality musical and spoken word performances,” said Bennington Selectwoman Jeanne Conner. *“Many people in Bennington would not have access to performances like this which makes them even more important. Everyone deserves to experience the power of listening to live music.”*



3. A PLACE THAT CARES

The Better Places program is guided by the belief that all Vermonters deserve access to vibrant and welcoming public places in their lives and communities, and are committed to lifting up placemaking projects, policies, and practices that contribute to social and racial equity for a more just, inclusive, and equitable Vermont.

A great example is the Lamoille Art & Justice Project’s outdoor mural project on the Stowe Recreation Path. The Better Places grant helped install a beautiful community mural directly on the recreation path during a multi-day open community paint workshop in July 2022. Juniper Creative Arts guided participants in painting parts of the overall mural design, which was inspired by the podcasts, readings, and conversations about racial justice that their project has led over the two years. This community-driven project helped transform a popular summer spot for mixed-use recreation into a declaration of the community’s creativity, inclusivity, and values.



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4. A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN ENJOY THE GREAT OUTDOORS

The beauty of the Better Places grant program is that it embraces all kinds of public spaces and expands the meaning of a public gathering place. Many projects showcase Vermont's extraordinary natural setting and create new opportunities for folks of all ages to get outside in a healthy way.

Art and outdoor recreation are coming together in Hyde Park, one of the 18 towns along the 93-mile Lamoille Valley Rail Trail. *"We want to create an attractive place that can pull folks together to have a fun picnic, start a walk or ride on the rail trail, and inspire visitors to travel the short distance up the hill to explore the village and the town—this art can be an anchor for the Village and act as a community gateway,"* says the town's Better Places crowdfunding page. They're calling the vision Hyde Park Views, which is designed by Vermont artist Dan Gottsegen and reflects the stories and images shared with him by local elementary school students and community members.



5. A PLACE WHERE YOU BELONG

The Better Places program looks to create public spaces and events that everyone can enjoy. Through Better Places, Vermonters are increasing access to inspiring public places for all people in Vermont, regardless of background, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, ability, religion, or geography.

St. Johnsbury, a town of 7,500 in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, activated their downtown through Final Fridays, which brought people together from different socioeconomic, political, racial, and other identity groups to create a shared sense of community on three beautiful summer evenings. Each Friday, between 30-45 different free art, music, and food experiences were featured, culminating in an event that turned the street into a pop-up concert venue in the evening. And the events were a smashing success.

"We achieved our goals of creating an inclusive event where folks across all income levels came out," said Gillian Sewake, Director of Discover St. Johnsbury. *"Most folks who are low income in our downtown can't attend our cultural programming. This really changed that."*



6. A PLACE WHERE YOU ARE EMPOWERED

Better Places empowers residents to play an active role in shaping their community. Anyone with an idea to improve their town can find resources, funding, and support to make their project possible.

With help from Better Places, Pittsford created the Village Farm Pavilion, which fosters community through after-school programs, community events, weddings, fundraising events, flea markets, book sales and more. During their campaign, community members got most excited about the empowering prospect of crowd-granting. A memorable moment came when they asked the Better Places team,

“You’re going to teach us how to fundraise?”



Sure enough, that’s what happened: Pittsford exceeded its \$11,000 goal to pay for building materials, labor, tables, and landscaping. And, in true community fashion, lots of other support emerged: Casella Construction generously donated the excavation work and poured the concrete pad, and local businesses Carrara Concrete and Gagnon Lumber reduced the cost of their products. Now, people in Pittsford have a place to gather!

7. A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN GET THINGS DONE

Better Places uses a method of grantmaking called “crowd-granting” that builds local awareness, excitement, and shared investment in community-led projects that bring the power to the people, not to a distant grant-making committee. Crowd-granting combines crowd-funding – the practice of funding a project with small donations from many people – with non-competitive matching support from the State for every eligible project.

Vershire is small but mighty: the town of 672 hosts a variety of public events throughout the year. February is Snowshoe-A-Thon, March is Town Meeting Day with soup luncheon gathering after, May is the Book and Plant Sale, July features the annual Volunteer Fire Dept BBQ, August brings the children’s VerShare Summer Camp, October: Fall Festival with “Stone Soup,” and December offers a Local Artisan Craft Fair. However, the town lacked one important feature: a place to host outdoor events under shelter.

Thanks to the Better Places grant program, that place is now the Vershire Town Center Pavilion. The most remarkable part of the Vershire story is that this town of 672 raised \$28,000 to bring their new community gathering space to life—and, in true small-town fashion, there was a pavilion-raising last September!

