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Windsor Learns How to Link Dreams, Reality

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

Local control through annual town meetings, selectboards, planning commissions and a host of other town-based entities is democracy at its most basic level and an envied, 200-year-old New England tradition. It is one of many pleasant differences that a “flatlander” notices after moving to Vermont, and we are fortunate indeed that we still run our local affairs this way.

But this is a different era. We live in a vastly changed world, country and state, and I have been thinking about how effective local planning and control can really be if so many of the forces that determine what takes place in our towns lie beyond our control.

What does this imply in practical terms for our area, especially in those communities that have seen a waning of their fortunes and are now struggling to get themselves back on their feet? Towns like Windsor, which lost almost 1,500 jobs between the late 1980s and early '90s and then saw the industry that defined it -- manufacturing -- vanish.

“From my perspective, everything is interdependent these days,” Vincent Fusca III, a Windsor selectman who is active in numerous local and regional organizations, told me. “You cannot just focus, from your position on the selectboard, on just the internal administration of the town,” he said. “You need to be involved in asking what are the external factors influencing Windsor.”

For Fusca, the biggest “external factors” in determining the economic fate of Windsor and every Upper Valley community are Dartmouth College, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center and their spin-offs.

“I would be hard pressed to think what else you could do that would have as much impact in driving your town's economic engine,” he said.

After spending some years looking backward in the hope of resuscitating the storied manufacturing era, Windsor has taken this reality to heart and seems to have made it

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the center of its revitalization process.

“In the last 10 years we have seen a shift to looking forward,” said John Tansey, chairman of the Windsor School Board. Rather than continue grieving after its loss of manufacturing jobs, Windsor decided to take control of its future. It hired a part-time economic development consultant, Jill Michaels, to give it additional muscle, raised financing for a new school, convinced Amtrak to reopen Windsor's train station, helped Simon Pearce expand into town, and set up elderly housing in the historic Runnemedede Mansions.

“From that point on, Windsor just never stopped,” Michaels told me. “The town was shrewd enough to develop a network within the Dartmouth community to leverage its geographical proximity to Lebanon and Hanover.” Before long it picked up rumors about a startup nanotechnology project. “That company is Seldon Labs and is now in Windsor,” Michaels said. Early this year, the Center for Precision Manufacturing, also founded by a Dartmouth grad, was lured to Windsor by a focused marketing and lobbying campaign.

“At CPM, relationships are being developed with Dartmouth and the University of Vermont. There will be graduate students, opportunities for doctoral theses, apprenticeship programs that will connect both with CPM,” Michaels told me. “So the ties with the area's economic engines in Hanover and Lebanon will grow and get deeper.”

The CPM and Seldon Labs are important for Windsor's long-range plan in another critically important way. Knowledge-based industries such as nano- and biotechnologies, high-technology driven precision manufacturing and the research and development surrounding them are today's job producers. With Seldon Labs, the CPM, and the Technology Park that will replace the old Cone-Blanchard complex, Windsor is positioning itself to take advantage of the fact that the Upper Valley's virtually recession-proof economic drivers are driven by knowledge-based technologies.

If Windsor's proximity to Lebanon and Hanover can be coupled with a demonstrated expertise in these growth industries, Windsor will have significantly improved its odds of accelerating its revitalization.

“People in Windsor should be optimistic today, but balance their feelings with realism,” Tansey told me. “When you hear about the potential of Seldon Labs or the CPM and similar developments, the natural impulse is after six months to ask, well where is it? These things take time, and we need to continuously attract other such entities, and simultaneously take initiatives to improve our schools and infrastructure,” he said.

Fusca can think of nothing more destructive for Windsor than to remain isolated and insulated, and to avoid any tendency to discourage sound, reasonable housing development, infrastructure and economic development. “Talk about a way to further

take yourself out of the competition,” he says.

Take a stroll down Windsor's Main Street and its growing retail scene, especially the Vermont State Craft Gallery, walk through the American Precision Museum (a national treasure), enjoy the sweeping Connecticut River vistas, then indulge in one of the region's best omelets at Dan's Diner. You will sense the first signs of a turnaround.

It is what happens when a town that has taken a severe economic hit identifies the external forces that shape it, and has the sense to connect them to its dreams.

Sarwar A. Kashmeri of Reading, Vt., advises corporations on communications and marketing strategy and is a fellow of the Foreign Policy Association. This twice-monthly column explores the Upper Valley's "business climate," focusing on the issues and conditions affecting the region's economic health. Kashmeri can be reached at skashmeri@aol.com.

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