

Exeter gains share of border funding

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EXETER — The Borderlands Project, an effort to preserve the “heart and soul” of rural towns along the Connecticut-Rhode Island border, has chosen Exeter and Killingly, Conn., to be the pilot towns that will receive about \$200,000 worth of expertise to fight sprawl and retain “what truly matters.”

Town Planner David W. Schweid, who steered Exeter’s application through the months-long process, was unavailable for comment yesterday. He was in Burlington, Vt., at CommunityMatters07, a conference sponsored by The Orton Family Foundation, which is providing money for the Borderlands Project.

The Orton family is proprietor of the Vermont Country Store, a retail, catalog and Web marketer of down-home and old-time clothing and products.

Officials from the winning pilot towns were told weeks ago, but the announcement was not made public until Tuesday.

Exeter Town Council President Calvin A. Ellis voiced appreciation at the announcement. “The technical support made possible through this pilot will allow Exeter to continue to grow,” he said, “while maintaining its rural and scenic character.”

Exeter residents and leaders will work with economists, designers and planners to envision a town center, preserve open space, farms and forests and create jobs while preventing the creep of unwanted development. The two pilot towns are expected to share their best practices with the 20 other towns facing similar challenges on the Connecticut-Rhode Island border.

In January, residents and landowners will be asked to identify what they like about Exeter and how they want it to look. Special focus will be on Route 2 development, protecting the Queen River and identifying a village center.

“There is a critical link between traditional village centers and surrounding farms and forests,” said Kip Bergstrom, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council, which, with The Nature Conservancy, is running the Village Innovation Pilot.

“The two pilot towns will help us choose” a consultant for the initial process, the policy council’s Ariana McBride said in August. “Of course, it’s a pilot, so we don’t know what will happen. We do hope as part of the pilot there will be regional sharing.”

One purpose of the Borderlands Project, its case statement says, is to get leaders from the region's most remote towns talking across state lines and to help them overcome similar challenges.

“Borderlands towns rarely have more than one paid employee to focus on land use, conservation and economic development,” the Borderlands case statement says.

Exeter's planner and assistant are part time, working on Tuesdays and Thursdays. There is no town manager. Members of the Town Council, the Planning Board and the Zoning Board of Review volunteer their time.

The proposal says “it is expected that these towns will investigate how channeling growth into a village can both offset the consumption of critical rural lands and meet other important community goals (economic development, housing, transit-based transportation.)”

McBride said Exeter is a beautiful community.

She said she and the Nature Conservancy's Kevin Essington, whom she called the driving force behind the project, were still actively fundraising.

Besides The Orton Family Foundation, funding comes from Northeast Utilities and other donors.

Killingly is expected to focus on how it will grow and what it will preserve. The relationship between the villages of Danielson and Dayville will be examined and applied to its other villages.

For more information, visit www.borderlandsproject.org or www.orton.org.

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