

the Chronicle

Vermont's Northeast Kingdom Past & Present

RUDAT Unveils Bold Plans

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by Joseph Gresser

Newport, VT— **“RUDAT? Who dat?”** Frank Knoll said Wednesday night, March 18, that was the question he asked himself last year when someone suggested that the city apply for a planning study. By Monday there was hardly a Newport resident who didn't know what the **Regional Urban Design Assistance Team** was and why it was in town.

In the space of less than a week the seven-person team of architects, planners and designers toured the city, met residents, heard their dreams, suggestions and complaints and, in an amazingly short time, published an 89-page book filled with practical and visionary suggestions for transforming the city.

Shepherded by **James Logan Abell, FAIA**, an architect from Tempe, Arizona, the team spent long hours over three days, walking the streets of the city, engaging in small group meetings focused on single issues, and listening in larger gatherings as ideas poured from eager citizens.

Then in two and a half days of deliberation, assisted by North Country Career Center students, Newport Mayor Paul Monette, and members of the Newport City Renaissance Corporation, the team put together its report, the book and a final presentation that held the attention of a 200-person audience for three solid hours.

The team's ideas ranged from the simple application of good design principles, such as replacing buildings on a street with ones that fit in architecturally, to pie-in-the-sky visions of a new bridge soaring over South Bay to connect Western Avenue with Main Street.

No matter how unlikely the results of the study might seem at first glance, the underlying reasoning seemed sound. Mr. Abell was able to point out how his proposed bridge would open South Bay to recreational development while at the same time working to unsnarl traffic at the intersection where traffic from the Causeway and the Long Bridge meet.

He pointed out that Newport will have to spend a great deal of money replacing the Long Bridge and renovating the Causeway Bridge in the foreseeable future. Mr. Abell even suggested a timeline. If constructed to open in 2018, the bridge could mark the hundredth anniversary of Newport's city charter. He suggested naming the proposed structure the Centennial Bridge.



Regional Urban Development Assistance Team (RUDAT) members are introduced to Newport residents at a community meeting at the North Country Union High School cafeteria on Wednesday, March 18.

The opening reception featured music from the school's jazz ensemble and an explanation of the RUDAT process. As all the large-scale public meetings in the visit, more than 175 people were in attendance.

From left to right are Joel Mills, an uncharacteristically somber-looking James Logan Abell, Jackie Barton, Eduard Freer, Carla Lerman, Judie Scalise, and J. Todd Scott. Photo by Joseph Gresser

The seed for Mr. Abell's grand vision may have been planted during a free-wheeling meeting Friday night during which city residents shared their hopes for the city. A consistent theme was the need for more access to the waterfront. Some complained that boating access to South Bay was blocked by the railroad bridge and the two automobile bridges.

Jim Johnson, the city's treasurer and clerk, said he thought the city made a big mistake by building a strip mall on "the best property in the city." He proposed the area be turned into a green space so "the waterfront can wrap around the whole city."

Ken Stocker, owner of the Brown Cow, also suggested the need for more access to the waterfront. Kathy Aiken said that the Gateway Center, on the waterfront, "could be used to better advantage." She proposed music and arts camps for children, and sailing lessons.

Some wishes, like the desire for a big box store, were parried by team members. Mr. Abell said he didn't understand why people in Orleans County don't see the Pick and Shovel as an 85,000-square-foot big box store.

While Mr. Abell introduced the big ideas, all the team members participated in the final presentation. Landscape Architect Eduard Freer praised Newport as a special place. "You have good bones," he explained before proposing a "tune-up." He said Gardner Park ought to be re-imagined as the equivalent of New York City's Central Park, an idea that was expanded throughout the study.

Carla Lerman, a housing and community planning expert from New Jersey, praised the work of Gilman Housing Trust in renovating some of the city's housing stock. She pointed out the large number of second homes in the Newport area, and asked if the city should work to attract more people who contribute to city coffers without using their share of city services.

With good design, more people can be attracted to live downtown, above businesses and offices, Ms. Lerman said. That accorded with comments from Diane Peel, a nurse at North Country Hospital, who said she loves living in a community where everything she needs is within walking distance and offered by merchants with whom she is personally acquainted.

J. Todd Scott, who specializes in historic preservation, urged residents to "strive to put quality into everything you do." He praised the city's "lively streetscape," and suggested a new building code that will return to an earlier style of narrower and taller buildings. These should be arranged to avoid blocking anyone's view of the lake, he added. Finally Mr. Scott offered a blue-sky idea — moving the Coventry Street barn to Gardner Park to serve as a boathouse and community center.



The ideas kept coming, too fast for any one person to absorb them all. For that there was the book, published at break-neck speed by the RUDAT team and a large group of volunteers, all kept in line by the book master, Katelyn Hudson, a student at the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture. Ms. Hudson is a Vermonter from Jericho who is proud of being the first from our state to attend the prestigious institution in Arizona.

The book was put together using the facilities of the career center, which team members pronounced "top notch," and copies were still rolling out of the color copier as the meeting broke up at 10 p.m. Monday night. For those who missed the meeting, some copies are still available from the Newport City Renaissance Corporation, which, along with the city and numerous contributors, hosted the RUDAT.

Mr. Knoll, president of Renaissance Corporation, said at the initial gathering that the idea for the team's visit came from Newport resident Gary Kellogg, who now lives in Lake Havasu City, Arizona.

That community, chiefly known as the current home of the original London Bridge, was a planned community started in 1964. Nevertheless, residents felt it had lost its spark and needed to come up with a plan for the future. They applied to the American Institute of Architects which sponsors the RUDAT program. After seeing the effects of the visit, which Mr. Knoll said still guide community development, he suggested that Newport could benefit from the program.

Renaissance Corporation leaders applied and, after a reconnaissance visit by Mr. Abell and Joel Mills, director of AIA Communities by Design, the umbrella organization for the RUDAT program, Newport was accepted as the first Vermont community in RUDAT's 40-year history.

Why was Newport chosen? Trish Sears, director of the Renaissance Corporation, had no doubts. "We're all that," she crowed.

The team members weren't about to contest her assessment. They all praised the city and its residents, and expressed eagerness to return to Newport to see the progress they were sure would be made in the near and long term.

The final word, of course, came from the irrepressible Mr. Abell, who finished the group's presentation with the sharp command.

"Be bold!"



RUDAT team sketches of the Newport Centennial Bridge

