

# Grand Isle County Regional Strategic Economic Development Plan

May 2004

## Strategic Initiatives

Grand Isle County, the fastest growing county in Vermont, is rich in natural assets: miles of shoreline on beautiful Lake Champlain that attract visitors in all four seasons, an agricultural heritage that includes apples, wine and dairy, a respect for the environment, and people who are resourceful. The resources to support economic development in the region, however, are limited. Therefore, service providers and those involved with economic development need to direct their efforts and expenditures on parts of the regional economy where it is recognized that these efforts will generate the highest potential return.

Building the competitiveness and expanding the scope of the region's strategic export-oriented and dollar-importing sectors was recognized by the working committee to be the means that offers the highest potential return to the Grand Isle regional economy. Other strategies of the comprehensive regional economic development plan dealing with issues such as infrastructure maintenance and development, work force development, and quality of life are important parts of this plan and will be accomplished through strategic partnerships with others inside and outside of the region.

Focus is an essential aspect of this strategic economic development plan. Since we cannot be "all things to all people," achieving focus on a defined set of specific tasks under each of the strategies is crucial if organizations within the five communities in the county trying to improve the regional economy are to be successful in economic development/revitalization in the region.

By focusing its efforts and its limited resources on these critical engines driving the regional economy, the working committee is committed to an approach of helping groups to direct their efforts and resources to where they can be most effective in generating a positive economic return to the residents of all communities in the region. This focus involves concentrating on high-valued added job development opportunities tied to dollar-exporting, key sectors that comprise the region's "economic drivers or engines."

### **Strategy #1: Facilitate an environment of public-private partnership, and inter-community cooperation.**

Grand Isle County faces the same cross pressures surrounding economic development and growth as many communities within the state and nation.

Therefore, cooperation and collaboration with surrounding regional and state organizations is critical for leveraging the resources within Grand Isle County.

**Goals:**

- To establish collaborations and partnerships with federal, state and local governmental entities as well as other organizations within and outside of the county, and improve local collaboration between communities by identifying common needs.
- To facilitate the smooth and efficient identification and management of economic development opportunities that may involve multiple communities and economic development services organizations within and outside the county.
- To promote greater understanding of development and growth issues within individual communities in the region.

**Goal 1 – Action Steps:**

- Develop an inventory of all local economic development regulations in the various communities that are in potential conflict (within 90 days).
- Identify all areas of inter-community cooperation and commonality of purpose within the county—such as for Fire, Rescue, FEMA, Department of Homeland Security, transportation, water systems and other infrastructure, and the Schools (within 90 days).
- Focus on economic development projects that benefit all communities, e.g. Island Line Trail and Islands Center for Arts and Recreation
- Develop a list of organizations with countywide scope; identify ways they already cooperate, and ask for ideas on how else they might collaborate. Create new opportunities for collaboration.

**Goal 2 – Action Steps:**

- Complete a summary organizational chart of economic development and business assistance services in the region (within 60 days).
- Schedule series of Rotary and similar public presentations, including Planning Commissions, Select Boards, and Zoning Boards (where they exist) to present the current institutional structure (within 90 days).
- Develop a “Did You Know” brochure that includes information on all the ways the Regional Development Corporation and the Small Business Development Center can assist existing and new businesses to be successful.

**Goal 3 – Action Steps:**

- Identify, prioritize and present a candidate list of economic development-business development issues to facilitate inter-community cooperation in the region.

- Provide communities with periodic updates on how projects of mutual interest are succeeding, working cooperatively-collaboratively (within 120 days).
- Identify institutional changes in the existing economic development and business development services delivery systems that are needed and disseminate information widely (within 150 days).
- Work with members of the Northwest Regional Partnership, which includes Franklin County Industrial Corporation, the Northwest Regional Planning Commission and the Franklin County Regional Chamber to establish collaborative efforts for economic development opportunities at all institutional and private sector levels possible. This effort can be integrated with the requirements of a joint work plan between the Lake Champlain Islands and Franklin County Chambers of Commerce.
- Working with the SBDC, develop and implement a comprehensive business survey in order to understand the regional needs for small businesses.

**Strategy #2: Implement a targeted business development program focused on small- and micro-business development in the key economic sectors of the county economy.**

Small business development and recruitment are both important components of a successful economic development strategy for Grand Isle County. Ideally, this approach would include a mix of short-term and long-term initiatives as well as incorporating both job retention and business expansion components. The major sectors identified by the group as key to the local economy are tourism, production agriculture, home based businesses and light manufacturing in the Alburg Business Park.

**Goals:**

- Work aggressively to support the existing regional job base through local, regional, and state institutions.
- Provide technical assistance services.
- Develop and implement a recruitment program that builds on the current assets of the county.
- Understand the needs and resources to businesses as they pertain to regulatory issues.

**Action Steps for Tourism Industry:**

- Create a complete profile of the Tourism industry, including properties, lodgings, attractions and annual events, e.g. investigating the needs of boaters and anglers
- Identify Chamber and non-Chamber members in order to create an inclusive data set.

- Develop an “Ambassador’s Program”, with a goal of contacting or visiting all existing tourist-related companies in the county to assess their needs and share information.
- Invite interested parties to periodic meetings with a goal of creating a county-wide schedule of events.
- Develop a resource inventory for areas of opportunities to work collaboratively, e.g. creating vacation packages, coop advertising, cross-marketing and public relations, and recruiting new audiences within the drive market.
- Complete the full business development /recruitment marketing message based on the specific advantages of the region (e.g. ED resource assets, and Lifestyle-Quality of Life) including those that exist and those that are likely to be developed by the region in the future.
- Facilitate opportunities for professional development within the industry.
- Explore possibilities to develop agri-tourism. Contact State and national resources for information.
- Develop a committee of interested local parties to lead information-gathering efforts.

#### **Action Steps for Alburg Business Park:**

- Working with the Alburg Business Park Board, create a web presence with information on how to contact and receive information about opportunities for business development in the Park.
- Develop a long-term, strategic business recruitment program focused on the attributes of successful regional employers that utilize the competitive assets of the county.
- Develop a list of companies outside of the county that represent strategic recruitment opportunities by current (beginning with the Alburg Business Park asset) and prospective area of focus.
- Develop the recruitment marketing message based on the specific advantages of the region.
- Contact the Triangle of Excellence organization to develop specific initiatives to promote the Alburg Business Park.

#### **Action Steps for Production Agriculture:**

- Further refine the functional profile of the Production Agriculture industry (within 60 days).
- Develop a specific list of options for collaboration for county businesses including opportunities both inside and outside of the county. This task includes exploring options with the VT Dept. of Agriculture, the VT Land Trust and the Alburg Farmer’s Market. Explore opportunities for agri-tourism to create new visitor destinations.
- Identify potential threats to production agriculture, and keep businesses informed and focused on solutions.

### **Action Steps for Home-Based Businesses:**

- Inventory as many home-based businesses in Grand Isle County as possible, with the assistance of town government and grand lists.
- Create a functional profile of possible home-based businesses, including specific resource needs of home-based businesses.
- Develop a list of economic development and business assistance services for home-based businesses.
- Develop and implement a public education message to disseminate the information.
- Develop a list of strengths and weaknesses of Grand Isle County for home-based business development based on the economic development resources assessment.
- Use the above information to develop a marketing message to recruit new businesses, based on the specific advantages of the region.
- Develop a specific list of options for collaboration, including opportunities both inside and outside of the county, in order to promote business recruitment that utilizes the competitive assets of the county.

### **Strategy #3: Implement an integrated program that identifies and evaluates all traditional and non-traditional infrastructure needed to support a high-performance Grand Isle County economy, and then sets goals to accomplish acquisition of needed infrastructure.**

The availability of high-quality infrastructure to move things, people, and especially information into and out of the county is essential to attracting and retaining globally competitive small businesses in the county. The group identified access to broadband Internet capability, addressing lake water quality, lake access for anglers and boaters, waste water treatment issues, mosquito control and public and private transportation issues including the provision of park and ride lots as infrastructure necessary to enhance economic development in the Islands. The addition of infrastructure to create the Island Line Trail and the Islands Center in Knight Point State Park will also create opportunities for economic development.

#### **Goals:**

- Identify the infrastructure assets of Grand Isle County on a town-by-town basis.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of available infrastructure in supporting current and future business expansion in the key industry sectors, on a town-by-town basis.

- Design steps to create needed infrastructure.
- Expand public awareness of the importance of high quality and available infrastructure to economic development in Grand Isle County.

### **Goals #1 & 2 – Action Steps**

- Complete a comprehensive inventory of the county’s key economic development and other business support infrastructure – including transportation, waste water, electric power and other traditional infrastructure, as well as broadband, cellular service, websites, etc. on a town-by-town basis.
- Work with Northwest Regional Planning office, select boards and Economic Development Council of Northern Vermont to complete inventory.
- Identify gaps in needed economic development and business support infrastructure based on the completed infrastructure inventory.
- Design countywide steps to address any deficiencies in the economic development infrastructure.
- Design a plan for asset maintenance on a region-wide, systems basis.

### **Goal # 3 – Action Steps:**

- Develop telecommunications plan needed for the region to go “wireless” within the next two years.
- Collaborate with Economic Development Council of Northern Vermont to bring broadband Internet to the Islands.
- Support the efforts of The Agency of Natural Resources, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Northern Lake Champlain Advisory Committee and local citizens to improve the water quality in Lake Champlain.
- Work with state legislature and local communities to develop Park and Ride facilities for the Island.
- Collaborate with Local Motion and the Island Line Steering Committee, local select boards and planning commissions, and Northwest Regional Planning’s TAC to create the Champlain Islands Trail, a multi-use recreational route connecting South Hero with the border of Canada.
- Complete facility infrastructure for the Islands Center for Arts and Recreation at Knight Point State Park.
- Complete a comprehensive inventory of water/waste water issues as it pertains to business expansion in Grand Isle County.

### **Goal # 4 – Action Steps:**

- Develop communication tools to publicize the development and maintenance of these critical infrastructure assets to elevate regional awareness of the importance of developing those assets. Update these tools periodically.

## **Strategy #4: Workforce Development and Education: it begins in pre-school and incorporates lifelong learning.**

Grand Isle County is unique in that its high school-aged children are exported to other communities to continue their education. Students in the northern half of the Island go to Franklin County or upper New York State, while students in the southern communities get their education in high schools throughout Chittenden County. As a result, the continuum of education is fractured. Likewise, there are few opportunities for adult education that can support workers in their jobs, or help them to acquire new skills. Educators and parents are working with economic development organizations to ensure that decision-makers understand the importance of early education for school success.

### **Goals:**

- Ensure that all children arrive at school ready to learn by supporting early childhood education.
- Support the acquisition of skills to ensure a marketable workforce, for school-age children as well as adult education.
- Partner with other organizations and employers to provide retraining opportunities.

### **Action Steps:**

- Local Advocacy for Skills to Obtain Work: Work with the Vermont Department of Education, the Agency of Human Services, the school district and early childhood providers to ensure that children have access to early childhood education, full day kindergarten and preschool.
- Provide support for middle school children to promote self-esteem, education programs (augment until consolidated), after-school programs: to ensure that gaps don't develop in skills, etc.
- Develop career education opportunities.
- Provide local counseling services for high school students.
- Partner with other regional organizations to offer a leadership development program for youth and adults.

### **Suggested Business Practices:**

- Businesses encourage parents to attend scheduled parent conferences in schools
- Support high school students (drop out, drop in) by developing programs for alternative high school students; encourage students to re-enter education.
- Encourage employer-sponsored education by making sample training contracts available to local businesses.

### **Partnerships to Promote Workforce Training:**

- Design creative and interesting programs to improve student career awareness, career exploration, and the knowledge and skills needed for success in the modern workplace. Build on successful models already in place in northwest Vermont (such as the Learn To Earn on the Middle school level, mentoring programs, etc.), and through establishing an out-reach program for business leaders and educators. Establish mentoring programs.
- Partner with the Franklin/Grand Isle Workforce Investment Board to provide expertise and services.
- Partner with schools on the Islands to identify potential students, provide location for classes in QuickBooks, etc.
- Working in partnership with higher education in northwest Vermont and elsewhere (e.g. Cornell), expand the delivery of secondary and post secondary educational programs in the county, including the availability of degree programs and adult education, that support the region's key, economic development opportunities.
- Create partnerships with other vendors of adult education and make resources available to Islanders. These services should be affordable, easily accessed, and support the needs of the working public.
- Create partnerships with employers to provide skill training in specific areas, e.g. ServSafe training for summer kitchen help, First Aid, etc.

### **Analysis of Workforce Resources and Needs:**

- Conduct a needs assessment of re/training for Islands' businesses.

## **Legislative Advocacy**

- Study the following issues to accomplish both goals:
  - Universal health care
  - Full middle school program for all Island students.

## **Strategy #5: Build regional capacity to access capital to expand early stage capital options for regional entrepreneurs, and to proactively provide expanded financing options for beginning businesses.**

During the planning process, the working group has identified a significant gap in the supply of equity and early-stage financial resources in the region. The working group identified the need to be proactive in expanding the number and depth of financial options and tools available to new entrepreneurs and regional economic development professionals as they seek to retain key existing employers and to encourage new entrepreneurs. This was thought to be a statewide problem consisting of both lack of information and education for entrepreneurs, where the current system is passive, but needs to be “active” in terms of availability of programs and capital sources state- and New England region-wide. Grand Isle County’s Small Business Development Center can be a key partner in this strategy.

### **Goal:**

- Expand the number and depth of financial options and tools available to new entrepreneurs, and to regional economic development professionals.
- Disseminate information about available resources.

### **Tasks:**

- Develop a “Starting and Running a Business in Grand Isle County” informational packet addressing financial resources, planning resources, educational opportunities for starting and expanding business. Use resources of the Small Business Development Center as well as the Economic Development Council of Northern Vermont. Put on CD and online.
- Hold informational/educational classes for new businesses.
- Track inquiries and follow up with potential new business owners.
- Develop a peer/mentor relationship program to support new business owners.
- Ensure that materials at the SBDC, located at the Chamber, are current.
- Work with the Vermont Economic Development Authority (VEDA) to identify how to establish direct Grand Isle County linkages to the early-stage debt capital and other existing/developing financial resources programs (within 90 days).

- Identify range of capital options including private equity funds (e.g. industry based), private sector sources, governmental funding sources, foundations, and existing angel investors networks that could be employed in the region for entrepreneurs.
- Develop regional knowledge and “know-how” for raising and/or gaining access to early-stage capital sources (e.g. so-called mezzanine debt and various equity capital sources) to develop options for new business start-ups and owners of existing strategic businesses in the region to further expand and grow their businesses within the Grand Isle-Franklin County region.

**Strategy #6: The institutions and private citizens of Grand Isle County will work cooperatively to build a regional quality of life that is consistent with the labor force-entrepreneurial needs. These include building a high performance economy with quality jobs, safe communities, good schools, and opportunity, while preserving the natural beauty and resources of the county.**

“Quality of life” is becoming an increasingly important aspect of what is needed for a region to attract and retain the type of talented work force that is required for a strong, diverse economy in the county. It is an integral part of any strategy that addresses the needs of the region’s key economic driver sectors as they seek to develop the work force needed to succeed now and into the future. Key to the success of any strategy will be fostering the cooperation and collaboration among communities on the Islands, finding ways to overcome a history of insularity and a “go it alone” mentality.

It is our belief that Economic Development affects everyone, and building ‘connection’ instead of insularity is a natural step in meeting our goals. Building our area toward strong social and economic prosperity, while enhancing our environment, will serve all purposes.

**Goals:**

- Develop a plan to promote county-wide resident cooperation.
- Identify specific county-wide projects aimed at enhancing the cultural, social and environmental amenities.

**Goal #1 Tasks:**

- Develop a method of identifying residents:
  - Contact:
    - Town Offices
    - Schools
    - Real Estate Offices
    - Chamber of Commerce

Vermont Social Services  
911 List

- Separate residents into three segments:
  - New
  - Compose Welcome Letter
  - Gather information for welcome packet
- Enlist and organize volunteer network in each community
  - Over 2 years
  - Always lived here
- Arrange a series of Community Building Potluck Suppers
  - Organize a revolving committee to handle scheduling, advertising, etc.
  - Criteria: Bring someone you already know, and someone that you don't know
  - Purpose: Integrate Community members over shared food
  - Approach: Every person in every community has something small or large to contribute at whatever level is appropriate for them. We are in the process of facilitating the human bond that connects us all. Only the names and faces are different, the problems and goals, we share. "Come and enjoy our commonalities and ultimately know the pleasure of being involved in your community."

#### **Goal #2 Tasks:**

- Investigate possible abandoned farmlands for purchase [use Shelburne and Huntington as examples].
- Develop a Grand Isle County multi-use development center.
- Propose a property owner's association.

#### **Strategy #7: Work cooperatively to improve the availability work force housing in the region by increasing the number of affordable housing options available to those who seek to live and work in the county now and in the future.**

High performance regional economies are characterized by their commitment to a high quality of life where workers can live within a reasonable commute of where they live. Access to affordable worker housing is a key aspect to quality of life for a high performance economy. Increasingly, "best practices" economic development strategies view quality and affordable work force housing as important asset for attracting and retaining a capable work force with the needed skill sets to improve a region's economic performance.

**Goal:**

- **Develop a coordinated regional approach to address the housing issues related to the needs of the regional work force—as they currently exist or are expected to develop in the future—consistent with enhancing the overall quality of life in the Islands.**

**Goal #1 Tasks:**

- Establish a regional work force housing task force to work cooperatively with Grand Isle County communities, county stakeholder groups, and with partners in neighboring counties to effectively communicate the fact that there is a *Northwestern Vermont* housing market that is not influenced by individual community-county boundaries (Within 180 days and on-going).
- Work cooperatively with regional partners to update existing housing needs assessments for the county to ensure the best possible information and data have been brought into the outlook for future housing needs in the region (Within 180 days and on-going).
- Assist these partners with developing credible impact analysis for targeted audiences such as municipal officials, homebuilders, realtors, and mortgage lenders as to the importance of having an adequate supply of work force housing across the price spectrum in the county (Within 180 days and on-going).
- In coordination with the partners identified above, assist the task force in preparing and delivering credible estimates of housing need and other important workforce housing information via workshops for municipal officials and others. The workshops would ideally address issues such as: (1) the impact of the region's changing demographics on the need for different types of housing, (2) the effect additional housing units have on municipal property tax bases, (3) the effect of additional housing on demand for municipal services and school capacity, and (4) the need for higher density development to preserve open space and keep the costs of housing affordable (within 365 days and on-going).