

Weaving Internet Connections into Community

Front Porch Forum, Burlington

During the public dialogue process that informed the creation of this Roadmap, we heard time and time again that people want an online resource to connect neighbors in a community. For many towns in the state, that resource already exists in the form of the Front Porch Forum.

Michael and Valerie Wood-Lewis launched a community online forum in their Burlington neighborhood in 2000. Due to the success of their original neighborhood forum, they expanded and created Front Porch Forum in 2006 to help other communities be better connected. Today all 19 towns in Chittenden County have Front Porch Forums. The program has expanded to other areas of the state as well, with the goal to be statewide by the end of 2011. An average neighborhood forum covers 500 households, and typically one-third of those households subscribe. In some areas, participation is closer to one-half of households subscribing, and in a few communities, like Huntington, almost 90% do.

So what do all of these subscribers actually do on Front Porch Forum? Michael Wood-Lewis says, "The nature of the thing is a little deceiving – people think of it as a place to post announcements. But what's much more subtle, or profound, is that on a daily basis people see a collection of messages about things neighbors might talk about — a lost cat, an opinion about a school play, a bear sighting, sharing a ladder, etc." He continues, "People get great direct results, but if that's all they did, it would be a failure. The fact that these people live so close means the strands of the web of community get interwoven more and more every day." Although the forum may be virtual, it connects real people who may someday meet in person at school functions, at local events, or just walking down the sidewalk past neighbors sitting out on their front porches.



► **Contact information:**

Michael Wood-Lewis, Co-founder
www.frontporchforum.com
contact@frontporchforum.com



7

A Small School with a Big Reach

The Sustainability Academy, Burlington

An octopus is an unusual way to describe a school, but in the case of The Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes, the description fits quite well. Jen Cirillo, Director of Professional Development at Shelburne Farms, says, "The Sustainability Academy is like an octopus with tentacles that reach out all over the world," and it's that reach into its local community and beyond that makes the school a model for others to follow.

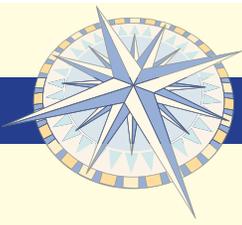
The Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes is a k-5 magnet school that is a part of the Sustainable Schools Project. In September of 2009, it became the nation's first magnet school with a sustainability theme, and its partnership with Shelburne Farms has enabled its teachers to follow through with that theme. Sustainability Coach, Anne Tewksbury-Frye says, "Through this partnership we began the process of developing a curriculum that incorporated understanding of our connections to our community and to our place, and provided ways for students to make a difference." As teachers identify the curriculum that they will teach, the educators at Shelburne



Provided by Sustainable Schools Project

► **Contact information:**

Anne Tewksbury-Frye,
Sustainability Coach
The Sustainability Academy
www.sustainableschoolsproject.org
atewks@bsdvt.org



CHITTENDEN COUNTY



Farms help find community partners and places to support the learning. The Intervale, home to Burlington’s community gardens, has become one of those places. Students visit its farms to learn science concepts such as plant life cycles or to see where their food comes from, and then that learning is reinforced in the school’s cafeteria where food from the Intervale is served.

The students who attend the academy are not the only members of the community who learn something there. The school also hosts events that are open to the public, like programs by Burlington’s City Market focusing on healthy cooking on a budget or a political forum where students ask questions of elected officials. Additionally, students from many of the local colleges and universities spend semesters at the Sustainability Academy learning how to teach, and international visitors come to the school as well. The list of partners that the school now has is a long one, and Cirillo attributes that list to the school’s outward view. She says, “instead of a school that looks inward, this school has really been looking outward – what are our opportunities right outside our door and beyond?” It’s a question that certainly has served this school well.

Students visit its farms to learn science concepts such as plant life cycles or to see where their food comes from.



A Community Comes Together, One Bicycle at a Time

Bike Recycle Vermont, Burlington

The basic idea behind Bike Recycle Vermont (BRV) is simple. The organization accepts donations of used bicycles, volunteers refurbish those bikes and then low income Vermonters can purchase the bikes for \$25. Additionally, kids ages 8 to 18 can donate their time and, in turn, earn a bike. The whole system is incredibly simple, yet it has a big impact both from a sustainability standpoint and in terms of bringing diverse people together.

Clearly, choosing to ride a bicycle to get to school, work, the grocery store or a friend’s house is an environmentally literate choice. Keeping old bicycles out of the waste stream by refurbishing them takes that choice one step further. For Christine Hill, an AmeriCorps member who works at BRV, it’s the impact that the organization has on the local community that really inspires her. Since its inception, the organization has provided bicycles to homeless people, refugees, and to people receiving food stamps, Social Security disability and section 8 housing. As Hill puts it, “I have yet to come across a place where there is such a diverse group of people and personalities who mesh so well. You can have a 12-year old, 23-year old and 89-year old in the shop at the same time. When I started to work here, I felt like I was really seeing Burlington in the round for the first time.”

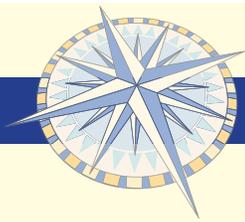
BRV aims to continue to increase its diversity as well. Hill says that she’d like to see more women in the shop. One way that she hopes to attract them is through an “upcycling initiative,” in which she offers workshops for making things like jewelry and wind chimes out of defunct bike parts. Thus it seems that BRV is the intersection of diversity, creativity and sustainability.



Image provided by Bike Recycle Vermont

► Contact information:

Bike Recycle Vermont
www.localmotion.org/programs/bikerecycle/
info@bikerrecycle.localmotion.org
802-264-9687



Higher Education in Vermont Earns High Marks in Environmental Literacy

University of Vermont's Eco-Reps, Champlain College's Guide to Greening Your Event and St. Michael's College's Teaching Gardens, Burlington and Colchester

Despite its small size, Vermont has a number of higher education institutions, and Chittenden County is home to several, including the University of Vermont, Champlain College and St. Michael's College. These three institutions promote environmental literacy in some creative ways.

As expected, students living in the dorms at the **University of Vermont** (UVM) are familiar with their Residence Assistants, or RA's. In addition to their RA's, UVM dorm dwellers also can seek the advice of their Eco-Reps. Eco-Reps are undergraduates at UVM who educate the students who live in the dorms about environmental issues. Eco-Reps can be found teaching students how to separate their recycling from their trash, doing energy audits on dorm rooms, exchanging incandescent light bulbs for compact fluorescent bulbs, weighing food waste in the dining hall, and going door to door in the dorms to engage students in conversations.

Eco-Reps Program Advisor, Erica Spiegel, says that one of the strengths of the program is its broad reach. She says, "The Eco-Reps crosscut many cultural and academic boundaries. They're not all environmental students. They have varied interests from art and music to engineering and technology." Additionally, the program is a partnership of varied university departments. The residence halls, Office of Sustainability, and energy engineers all work together on the project. Eco-Reps also partner with other school clubs from time to time, and their collaborative nature doesn't end with UVM. They maintain an extensive website in part so that they can share their ideas, manuals and work with other colleges and universities interested in accomplishing similar goals.

Another Chittenden County institution that shares its work with others is **Champlain College**, specifically in the arena of hosting green meetings. Christina Erickson, the college's Sustainability Director, says, "We're hearing that people are wanting a place to hold green meetings. Also, our conference and event center does a lot of business in the summer, so it's a great opportunity to reach lots of people." In response to this demand, the college has created a document entitled *Greening Your Event at Champlain College*, which can be found on the Conference and Event Center portion of the college's website. The guide encourages readers to consider site selection, transportation, food and waste when planning an event, and it is chock full of handy checklists.

Erickson admits that this project still is in its early stages. She believes that there's a lot to be done to further develop the project, but the college is making the commitment to do so. Sustainability has been mentioned as one of the college's core values, and now is very much a part of its planning, mission and vision. For that reason, we can expect to see further development of *Greening Your Event* along with many of the college's other sustainability efforts.



Image provided by University of Vermont

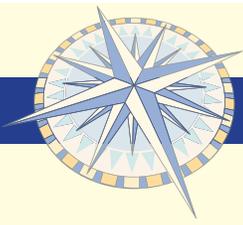
► **Contact information:**

Gioia Thompson, Director
Office of Sustainability
University of Vermont
www.uvm.edu/~ecoreps/
sustainability@uvm.edu
802-656-0906



► **Contact information:**

Christina Erickson
Sustainability Director
Champlain College
<http://www.champlain.edu/Conference-and-Event-Center/Green-Meetings.html>
cerickson@champlain.edu
802-865-5449



St. Michael's College in Colchester also has environmental initiatives it hopes to grow in the years to come. There, the Department of Education and Department of Botany have teamed up to create Teaching Gardens, designed to support learning community-wide.

Currently, there are four Teaching Gardens. The Books in Bloom garden features plants that play a major role in children's literature. The Native Plants garden contains native and naturalized plants of our region. The International Garden consists of four quadrants, shaped like a globe, and plants are geographically planted in their correct locations. There's also the Word Garden consisting of stones with words carved into them that can be moved around to create phrases, sentences and poems.

St. Michael's botany and education students designed all of these gardens. Professors Valerie Bang-Jensen and Mark Lubkowitz explain that on any given day, a passerby might observe a St. Michael's poetry class creating a class poem in the Word Garden, a group of young children listening to their student teacher read aloud from a book that's tied to the Books in Bloom garden or a local hospice director engaging a group of students in a conversation about the role that gardens play for a person with a terminal illness.

Each year, the botany and education students build on what's been done in the gardens in previous years and add their own new ideas as well. It's clear that these gardens and the ideas that they generate will continue to grow for years to come.



Valerie Bang-Jensen

► **Contact information:**

Valerie Bang-Jensen, Department of Education
Mark Lubkowitz, Department of Biology
St. Michael's College

<http://academics.smcvt.edu/arboretum/home.htm>
vbang-jensen@smcvt.edu
mlubkowitz@smcvt.edu

It's clear that these gardens and the ideas that they generate will continue to grow for years to come.