



# Building coalitions for a better world

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I remember that March evening in 2017, when Dan Jones asked me to help him create a new nonprofit. I cringed at the thought of yet another organization in our already crowded field of social and environmental interests. But when he said he wanted to realize the redevelopment concepts from the Sustainable Montpelier 2030 design competition, I was hooked. I agreed to help him, if he agreed to these two caveats: First, I would volunteer my time for a year in the hopes that I could raise the funds to pay a small staff, by June 2018. And second, recognizing the value of a deadline as well as the afore-mentioned crowded field, the organization would dissolve by 2030, or when it had fulfilled its mission, whichever came sooner.

So we set about to file the paperwork for 501c3 status with the IRS, and declared the birth of a new organization called the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition at a garden party in our backyard that summer. We highlighted the new organization's one and only funder, the Vermont Creamery, represented by Don and Allison Hooper. By happy coincidence, we were blessed with a rainbow as our guests parted for home.

It would be a year before we had the IRS letter and our first substantial funding. During those lean months, we honed the coalition's mission and started to build a board of directors with this worthy vision in mind:

The Sustainable Montpelier Coalition envisions a thriving New England city that is economically robust, energy efficient, and environmentally durable. Here in Montpelier, different generations will walk, bike or ride micro-transit to work and learn, to shop and recreate. People will live in affordable, sustainable housing in a vibrant commercial downtown. This vision will rescue our state capital from a downtown threatened by rural sprawl and a changing climate. SMC's role is to catalyze public commitment for this vision, and organize pilot projects that reshape our state capital into an iconic, sustainable American city that builds economic and environmental resilience.

Dan and I have worked countless volunteer hours, along with Elizabeth Parker and Tino O'Brien, chairman of the board of directors, and board members Ken Jones, Tim Terway, Scott Muller, and Geoff Byers, to define a vision and hammer out a work plan. Many other caring and creative individuals, including Goddard's sustainability champion, Catherine Lowther, have contributed to the vision and the initial work.

Needless to say, writing grant proposals for an organization that is just leaving the gate, with virtually no track record is daunting. But perseverance and a compelling message about Montpelier's untapped potential, brought two much needed grants to the coalition that will benefit our humble capital city for years to come — one, a multi-year grant from the Canaday Family Charitable Trust, and the other, a single year grant from the National Life Group. With this support, the coalition will put the wellthought out work plans to work for downtown Montpelier.

And what are those work plans? The coalition will start with a campaign to "put parking spaces in other places." Moving parking lots may seem like an odd way to bring the city to energy independence. But, the glaring roadblock to the

redevelopment of the downtown is that 60 percent of the land area — 60 percent of the developable land — is taken up with parking lots for commuters, many of whom actually live in the city. Not to be confused with parking for visitors or shoppers, much of this parking is behind the buildings on State Street and comes right up against the Winooski and the North Branch Rivers. Most of these parking lots block our city from building energyefficient, ecologically resilient and affordable residential and commercial projects and keep us from enjoying our beautiful rivers.

That's the "what" of the coalition's work plan, and the "how" of it is (surprise, surprise) to build coalitions. The coalition intends to empower and inspire the community to support and participate in the smart redevelopment of our capital city. To that end, the coalition is creating a series of roundtables on transportation, housing and open space. The coalition is bringing together thought leaders and interested citizens to think creatively about a resilient, efficient and robust future and to resolve the issues that prevent progress toward those qualities. Among the many potential partners, the coalition will be working closely with the Vermont River Conservancy on the Lower North Branch Roundtable, to bring landowners in that area together to find opportunities for economic development and to access and appreciate the North Branch at its confluence with the Winooski.

The Canaday Family and the National Life Group grants give the coalition a unique window of opportunity to help Montpelier become a national model for energy efficiency, economic vibrancy and ecological resilience, as well as a fun place to live, work, walk and learn.

It's a big job, and we will need your help. Please get in touch with us. For more information about the coalition and ways you might help breathe life into our downtown, please write to Dan or me

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