

An Overview History of the Creation of the
Economic Development Committee of the
Addison County Chamber of Commerce

In the early '80s the business community in Addison County wanted an effective economic development organization. It would have a very strong business voice and would be extremely pro business. The State of Vermont had a long-standing program of funding regional economic development organizations through grants that would essentially pay or assist in paying the salary of the full-time person dedicated to the purposes of economic development. It was the State's goal and, in fact, their operating policy to deal with these regional groups and not to deal with towns and cities or town development corporations with the possible exception of Burlington.

As funding sources began to dry up for a number of groups, the Regional Planning Commission started talking about setting up a business development arm and going after such grants. Because of the then Director of the Regional Planning Commission and some past problems with the commission actually opposing economic development, there was a strong sense that some other group should attack this issue. Under the State law and rules in place at that time only two groups were eligible for the grants. Regional Economic Development Corporations and Regional Planning Commissions. A group under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce began to study this program. The group consisted of people from Middlebury, Vergennes, Bristol and some other outlying towns. The rules at that time were that you needed ten towns to agree to your mission and purpose and an existence to obtain a grant and it was felt that there would have to be some representation from those towns. It was also felt that politically there would be a need for representation from regional planning, the Chamber and the primary commercial centers. From this beginning, Otter Creek Regional Economic Development Corporation was formed to represent all the towns in Addison County with the exception of Hancock and Grandville. The Regional Board was meant to consist of a representative from Regional Planning, from the Chamber, someone from Middlebury, Bristol and Vergennes and two people elected at large from the other supporting towns.

The group got together and held its first annual meeting in New Haven where the Board was formed and then set about finding a director. Lanny Smith was hired. It was felt that Lanny being an agriculturally oriented person would alleviate some of the political concerns and in being a representative, would have credibility and contacts in Montpelier.

We operated out of the Chamber office. The Chamber supporting the activities not only with cash but with frequent loans to meet the cash flow needs as well as secretarial support and guidance. We had our problems in focus and direction. The Board had problems focusing and the Chamber was having problems in dealing with an organization working autonomously out of their office space. When Lanny decided to maintain his seat in the

Legislature he felt he needed to give up this job which he did. Another search was conducted and Glenna Piper was hired. During this time frame the Chamber moved to its new offices. We continued to have some problems with the autonomy issue as well as funding and interface on the secretarial support side. The business roundtables were formed at this time and classes continued to be held. Money was starting to be raised, predominately from the educational programming. Vergennes give a contribution and linked future grants to contributions from other towns.

It became apparent that Otter Creek was going to have continuing problems raising money unless it totally separated itself from the Chamber and in essence became a competitor for membership and fund raising dollars. This was deemed to be not acceptable in our small economic base. We continued to have problems with the Board focusing on true development and not focusing on the preservation of the status quo.

The final resolve was to merge the two corporations and have Otter Creek Economic Development Corporation become the shell which was maintained for a couple of years and the Chamber to take over as the grant applicant and have the Development Corporation become a department or division of the Chamber. In doing this the Board was reconstituted. They had one person representing an employer of more than 50, less than 50, an employer in a commercial center, an employer in a rural center, somebody with an educational interest, a municipal officer, one person at large, and, also, one person involved in Regional Planning. The merger was completed. State rules changed and the Chamber could now apply for the grant. Following the merger and a new grant application, the Board was reconfigured with a stronger business vent and today we have Eliza as our Director and the Board is currently configured.

The above history of OCREDC is from the memory of Tom Corbin, the impressions give of the political scene and problems between groups are his.

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