

Interview with Donna Walters

I'm Donna Walters and I live at Wharf Lane Apartments at 57 Maple Street

What's your involvement with Plan BTV and what's been going on with it around town?

I first got involved by attending the design charet that Diane Goyer facilitated at SEABA. It was the first time I met Bruce Seifer and Megan Moir I think is her name. She is the city's stormwater expert, she spoke to the group as well and gave us some historical context for our neighborhood, the Pine Street corridor, and also the city's challenges with stormwater and managing that. Diane brought lots of maps, all different sizes with small sections blown up. It was really neat. I didn't know we had a barge canal here in the neighborhood, and we took a little fieldtrip down to see it.

I'm feeling much more connected to my neighborhood since I participated in the design charet. And from that, I met a whole bunch of the artists who have art studios in the block between Howard Street and marble Street.

Talk a little bit about your ideas for creative use of green space and uses of barge canal:

First of all, the barge canal has been fenced off with no trespassing signs. That's probably why I didn't know about it. I've been here three years, its like two blocks from my house and I didn't know about it. You can't really see it from the bike path. You can see it from the...if you drive into the parking lot where Myers bagels is and you drive down to the end of the parking lot you can get a good look at it there.

One of the things that Diane Goyer did during the design charet was give us a little history of how that came to become a brownfield. We walked down in there and the water level was really low so you could see the layers of the matting they put down to hold the contaminated particles down on the bottom so they don't seep up into the water.

But it was so pretty walking down in there. It's called a brownfield but its like, "oh, this could be our new greenfield."

So people just started getting excited about being able to take a walk down there at lunch time, having a place to sit and eat your lunch and have a meditative moment in the middle of you work day. It's really convenient for people who work at Dealer.com or the artists that are in that Howard block, the Maltex building. And even the people in the Innovation Center could access it from the other end.

And yet it's completely fenced off with no trespassing signs so there's no access to it right now, but we just started dreaming about it as a place with informal recreational paths and little benches to sit on. And how nice would that be?

We also had visions of the bike path connecting Pine Street, that Howard block over to the bike path...and that would go right across the north end of the Barge Canal. If you could have a little viewing area there, where there was educational signage about the history of how this became a brownfield and how the community has handled it, and even their interactions with the EPA were really interesting...how Vermonters have a different idea sometimes about handling some of these...some of the ways that our industrial...when we were in the industrial revolution age, we didn't always...weren't aware of the environmental impacts that we were creating for future generations and now, we are the future generation from 50 years ago and we have our own ideas about how to clean up the mess. And why can't we enjoy a space in an appropriate way? And what that is I don't really know, but it seems harmless that people could walk down in there. And some people thought that it would be nice if people could ice skate there in the wintertime. And they already do in an informal way. But gee, wouldn't it be nice if it was formalized so you didn't feel like you were trespassing?

Do you bike up and down Pine Street?

I don't, because it's just too dangerous. I try to avoid the roads where it's dangerous. I've had two biking accidents since I've moved here, so safety is really important to me and I don't feel safe biking down Pine Street.

Is biking one of your primary means of transportation?

Its not right now, but when I first moved here I didn't have a car for a year and a half and it was my primary mode of transportation. Biking and taking the bus system. And even the bus system doesn't serve Pine Street all that great I don't think, because it doesn't get on to Pine Street until Marble Street I think. It starts on St. Paul Street so it can pick up people at Decker Towers, then it comes over to Pine Street, so if you're standing on Main Street thinking how am I going to get down to the end of Pine Street, its not intuitive that you wouldn't wait on the corner of Pine and Main to get the Pine Street bus. So there's a little disconnect there.

Any other connectivity ideas that you have? Ways that getting around the neighborhood could be improved, like stairs on the hill by Resource connecting it to St. Paul near Decker Towers?

I think that's a great idea. Recently I went to Quebec City and that's a city really built on a bluff, kind of like our Battery Park. And not only do they have staircases in multiple places to connect the upper level to the lower level, they also have this really ingenious thing called a funicular. It's like an escalator, or, it's kind of a cross between an outdoor escalator and a ski lift I guess. You get in a car and just go from the top down to the bottom and it costs \$2.50. You can probably buy a pass but I don't know. I was there for a three day weekend. I thought, "wow, if I had my mother with me who is in her 80s, she would be able to do that, but she would not be able to get from an upper level to a lower level if she had to do the stairs."

Kind of like the idea to have a lift down Battery Street?

I think that's a great idea, and you could charge for it and cover the costs of implementing something like that. One, for the novelty and two, for the convenience.

I think of Burlington as a place where people implement innovative ideas because we're small enough to do that and it's probably less cumbersome in a smaller city than in a larger city. So, I don't know, I'm like dream big and reach for the stars and see what you can get out of it. And even if you only get half way...

What kind of ideas do you have to help the city meet its goals of making the city more livable? Local businesses that could benefit the city, meet the goals Vermont has around local economies, etc.?

One thing I think of is parking. The building that I live in has a front parking lot and a back parking lot. I see over at Decker Towers, which is another BHA property...Decker Towers and Wharf Lane Apartments...it makes so much more sense, in my opinion, to have the parking underneath the building. Because, you're not needing any additional space. You're on the same footprint. And it just makes it so much more convenient as well. It feels more secure if your parking is in your building than outside on the street. Plus you have the whole thing with snow in the wintertime. For the elderly population in particular...my mother lives in senior housing at Fern Hill apartments on North Prospect Street and it's really dangerous there for the elders who do have cars, coming in and out in the wintertime. They have to get everybody up and out at the same time when the plow truck comes and they're really at great risk of slipping and falling in the wintertime. Wouldn't it be convenient if they had parking underneath their building instead of outdoor parking? Or some kind of sheltered parking?

I see a lot of condos in the Burlington area that have long garages that are attached to the condo but that's not necessarily a good use of our limited space either but that seems to be what's limited, is the amount of space that we have.

So I really like the idea of tiered parking, under buildings when possible, with green spaces on top of them if there's not a building on top of it. Like a park on top of it. And they do a lot of that out in Colorado.

They're parking lots that are tiered parking lots, and they have a green park on top of it.

That sort of brings me to views of the lake. If you go into any of the buildings that are like 4 stories that are down at the bottom of the waterfront...like in the Pine Street corridor, I was up in the building that has Great Harvest bakery in it. From the third floor in that building you don't really have a view of the lake. But if you go up into a little studio space on the fourth floor, it's like wow, there's a really nice view here. And I think we need to capitalize on and think about the buildings that were building, that we can get spaces like restaurants with terraces that the public can go to and get views of the lake where you wouldn't ordinarily have a view of the lake.

The other thing is I went into the innovation building recently and walked all of the floors just to see what it was like and they had some interesting pictures in the lobby when you first walked in about...that were depicting what that mill looked like when it was no longer being used as a mill and was just a rundown eyesore. And now you walk into the building and see what a miraculous job they did rehabbing it. And I think they did a wonderful job.

But unfortunately all of the office spaces that are on the upper floors that would have a view of the lake are only accessible by private companies, organizations that are renting those spaces. Wouldn't it be nice if the eatery for the building was on the top floor so that everybody could enjoy a view of the lake? Let's face it, that's what makes Burlington a great place to live is the view of the lake and those beautiful Adirondack Mountains on the other side. How can we have more places in our town that the public has access to that view? And yeah, you can rent out private spaces, and one of the private spaces can be a restaurant that the public can access. Or a community room on one of the upper floors.

I interviewed someone yesterday on the 11th floor observatory, such a great view...

Somebody else that lives there took me up there at nighttime. The view of the city at night is awesome. I didn't know that Decker Towers had a community room on the top floor and I'm really happy to see that. Unfortunately the building that I live in, Wharf Lane, doesn't have any...our community room has no windows, its in the basement. It doesn't get used very much. Nobody wants to be in that room. So lets make bike storage out of that room and open up one of the apartments on the fourth floor for a community room.

[Bike storage] was a really hot topic at the design charet. A lot of people were complaining about not enough places to park your bikes, bike racks to put them in and lock them onto. There was a lot of interest in an idea of a transportation center to tie in with the new grocery store that City Market is proposing that would sort of tie in the end of the Champlain Parkway. My understanding is that the Champlain Parkway has morphed over the years, it keeps changing. It seems like they're coming to a point where they have a plan and they're going to implement something and it looks a lot different than what they were going to do ten years ago.

Bruce Seifert was telling us that at one point the plan had all of these mini pocket parks for pedestrians and bicyclists to stop and sit on a bench and be protected from the road with some shrubs, and those all got stripped out of the plan at some point. Maybe its time to dust off those pieces of the plan and bring them back. More places to sit that have a bench, especially for the elderly. There's a lot of people that have walkers and scooters...They can go a little ways and then they need to stop and rest. They can go a block at a time but they need little anchors spots where they can stop and rest.

I would really like to see more of those all over the whole city. There's a fair amount of benches on Church Street, but I would say Church Street could benefit from more benches.

I love the little pocket park in front of Great Harvest Bakery. Its protected from the road by shrubs...Its so enjoyable to discover it. You can be riding by and not even notice it. But if you're walking on the sidewalk you notice it. And it would be nice to have a couple more of those along the Pine Street corridor. Maybe as part of the zoning, that when you landscape the front of a building you make a little park out of it that people can use.

Mini parks, pocket parks, I don't really know the proper name is to call them.

There's also ways to do outdoor seating areas out of natural outdoor materials like stones.

Colleges are usually really good at doing this kind of thing, where they'll make a little half circle with tiered seating so that you can take your class out there and a class of 10-15 can sit on tiered stone walls like benches, and a little stone platform in front of that. It's a public space where people can sit, and its made out of natural materials so you don't have to buy benches, maintain benches.

And there's stone workers around here who could design these kind of things for us and probably get their name out there as the one who designed it and probably get more business for themselves.

Another idea that I wanted to talk about was something that Megan Moir, the city stormwater expert...I was talking to her about green roofs and trying to find out who in town does green roofs, if we have any. She said the hospital has one, and the new Hotel Vermont. When I first moved into Wharf Lane, the residents were talking about wanting to have a community garden. I had contacted Burlington Housing about that and they said there is no way that's going to happen. And now I learned from Megan that green roofs is a way to deal with your stormwater run off. And provide a view of the lake, in my opinion. And if you have benches in your garden area, you can have a meditative spot on your roof. And it would be so nice if you were looking down on somebody else's roof if you saw a green roof instead of heating vents and air conditioning vents.

When I went to Montreal recently, I stayed in an 8 story hotel and they put a restaurant on the top. I wouldn't say it was a green roof top, but they did have potted plants, and potted trees out there, and they made little seating nooks. They had a little area that you might call the outdoor lounge, and other part that was more like the regular restaurant. But it was all outside, it was on the roof. And in the summer time it was such an exciting dining experience.

I can't think of any place in Burlington where you have an outdoor dining experience...Except for a few places right on the waterfront. If you're up a block or two from the waterfront and don't have a natural view of the lake, the only way you can get it is from your roof.

And there's so much congestion in our restaurants on the weekends, on Friday and Saturday. As a local resident of Burlington, I try to avoid Church Street on the weekends. I go to Church Street during the week. I'm more inclined to go during the week if I want to eat on Church Street.

I think there's room for more restaurants down in the Pine Street area, to service the people that are working there and to just loosen some of the congestion for eating establishments on Church Street.

Plus if we get a connector path from the bike path to Pine Street, it would be a destination. When you ride the whole length of the bike path, other than a couple little restaurants at the Echo Center, there's no other restaurants. I think it would be great to say "hey, lets ride our bike down the bike path and scoot across down the connector and go eat on the new restaurant on the rooftop at the end of Marble Street, or at the end of the new proposed South Champlain Street.

I think the little parking lot on the north side of Dealer.com would be the ideal place for a public parking spot. Or behind the Maltex building. Because if you put it further south, then its too far away from the hub of where all the artists are anyway.

I want to follow up a little more about green roof tops. This comes from my conversation with Megan Moir. She was talking about tiered heights of buildings. If you have the building closest to the lake be under a certain number of floors, say 4 stories high. On the next street east of that, those building can be 6 stories high. The next buildings on the street east of that can be 8 or 10 stories high. So you're not going to build a building so high close to the lake that anybody east of you can then not build a building and have a view of the lake. And I think this would need to be addressed in the zoning regulations. So you could with confidence build a building that is going to have a public view of the lake on one of the top floors and not be worried that some else is going to build in front of you and impede your view.

The tiered buildings, with green spaces with views of the lake that have public access, not just for lease to private companies.

That's one of the reasons there's a group of artists that is putting together a resolution that is going to be brought forward to the NPA meeting tomorrow, asking that the form based code for the south end wait until they're done getting input like this from residents.

So heights of buildings with views of the lake, pocket parks are important. I started to mention the idea of the transportation center that somebody had a vision for that

would be at the same place as the new proposed city market. That makes so much sense that a grocery store anchors that end of town. If people are coming into town to work they want to park their car, bike the rest of the way into the city and back. You kill two birds with one stone: you drive into the city, you get a ten minute bike ride on either side of your day. There's a twenty-minute bike ride you got just by parking your car.

The guy that was bringing this forward was actually an architect. He imagined having a bike shop, bikes storage, rentals, a day long parking lot, other amenities you would need before you leave the city to go home.

And then the trolley would really benefit that too. Maybe that went back and forth every 10 minutes.

That's one of the problems that the changing schedule with the CCTA bussing...Its so irregular that its really hard to keep it in your head.

You have to study the schedule. It just doesn't run regular enough to make it as convenient as it could be. I understand why they do that, they're trying to cut down on their costs. But some of the major routes in town, like the City Loop, you have to get off the bus and get on another to continue on the loop at Cherry Street. Which makes it for people like the elderly who have a walker, or they're not as able-bodied as others...It's more challenging for them.

What about the question many artists are raising around affordability, and the resolution before the NPA?

I haven't done the research to answer that question intelligently or accurately, but one of the things I'm wondering about is the affordability thing. If you build a new building, will it be affordable, and what is affordable? And that's something that the artists have been talking about. Apparently whatever they're paying for rent right now is affordable because they've all congregated in this end of town. And so, lets say out loud what affordable is. But I'm not going to say it out loud because that's a sensitive issue. But I think someone should capture what the rents are right now that are considered affordable, and figure that into the formula. If you're going to build a new building or rehab an existing building, how can you maintain the rents at that rate.

I think of the Public housing where I live in Wharf Lane. I have an affordable housing rent, which means my rent is 30% of my income, whatever that is. And it caps out at full market rate. SO full market rate for my apartment is around \$800, and that included heat.

When I first moved in here I was homeless and unemployed and had my 84 year-old mother with me. I found her senior housing. I had no place to live. I was offered an apartment here, and my rent was zero because I was homeless and didn't have a job.

Ten months later, I found a good paying job, thankfully, and my rent went right up to full market rate and I was happy to pay it. It didn't actually seem like full market rate. \$800 for a one-bedroom apartment...I looked at apartments for \$800 and they weren't any place that I want to live. \$1200 would have gotten me a decent place to live. And I was like wow, \$1200 for a one-bedroom apartment?

So my hope would be that there would be some kind of financing, and maybe Champlain Housing Trust knows about this kind of stuff, that could rehab existing space and build new spaces that would make them on the same kind of renters affordability formula. I think that would really massage the fears of a lot of artists that have studio spaces if they knew that there was some kind of funding formula that would preserve affordability based on their income.

Conversation about increasing development focusing on higher-income residencies, driving up market rates, etc.

This is what gentrification is. This is what everybody is afraid of, and this is what happened in city after city. So as Burlingtonians, how are we going to prevent this from happening in our community? What we all love about Pine Street is that funkiness that we have down there. And yes I love funky, but I also want my artist friends who work in funky studios to have a well-insulated, well-light place to work.

There is something magical that happens when you're rubbing elbows with other people [referring to shared, collaborative art spaces]

I think as a community, we have to say we recognize the value in these kinds of spaces, and we're going to support them. Kings and queens and emperors supported this kind of artistry.

Its artistry, and its also making things that are useful in our lives that can't be stamped out in a factory.

Then we do have artistry than can be factory-ized (I'm making up that word). One of the glass blowers down there, they are incredibly artistic, but they're now getting orders form New York City and they're in production. They need to be moving into production mode now and they're trying to figure out how to do that.

And, they also have honed their craft to the point where other craft people can be renting space from them because the kind of equipment they need is expensive. If you have enough furnaces that other smaller artists could use, you're getting double...It's sort of the concept that if you invest a lot of money into a piece of equipment and you can use it two shifts instead of that, you get more bang for your buck out of your investment. Not that anyone is going to want to blow glass at three o'clock in the morning, but I'm sure there's down time when they're not using their furnaces when somebody else would love to pay X amount of dollars and use their furnace.

And the metal worker down there that work in the building where Resource is. John Marius. Charles Norse brought me over to him. He has this incredible idea that is all sketched out of a makers space, that different kinds of makers could be using the space for their own building, having enough space for others that don't do this full time but want to come in to dabble, or maybe want to come in for six months or a year to work on a project but they don't have enough money to invest in the equipment but he already has the equipment and they can share that. And there's enough space on either side for John to keep doing what he's doing. And somebody else to be renting some...swing space, I'll call it.

And so, having more of those kinds of spaces I think...these kinds of artists when their work is seen by people who come and visit our city who are just here vacationing...But they're people who own shops and stores from all over the place. They pick up their card and they start placing orders. It's a way to market the skills that our local makers have. And bring money into our local economy. So investing in that. If that means finding the financing for the city or the community or the state to invest in a couple of these buildings that are really well stoked with woodworking, metal working, glass building, industrial arts, and setting them up in such a way that they aren't just for one little existing business but are community shared resources. People would rent the space and the use of the equipment. Maybe not as a permanent tenant, but someone could come in and rent the space on a swing basis.

What are the partnerships for industrial arts with local schools?

Right next door to John Marius was this Habitat for Something...Youth Build. They're building structures, like the structures for the dugouts for one of the Parks and Rec's ballparks. Some young person that wants to go into carpentry that gets to do an apprenticeship there. They're building their skills, they're becoming employable, they're providing a community service. There is value in all of these. I think we need to be expanding these kinds of programs.

These are the things that are unique to Vermont. There are things that are a little closer to hand-made. There is value in hand-made.

What about creating a more inclusive community...Anything from community spaces to building and creating an integrated and inclusive community?

I'm still thinking about the place for makers. These aren't my ideas. I'm just sharing the conversations that I've heard and the places I've traveled.

I'm really good at hearing different people in my travels and knitting it all together. But I'm not an artist so I can't render a visual representation. But I can verbalize it pretty good. I'm hoping you guys can put this all in a picture form. Maybe it's too much. I wouldn't even know where to start trying to create a mural out of this stuff.

Charles has this idea of a makers space that has all of these green energy efficiency ideas. Like using the heat from a glassmakers furnaces to heat the water or heat the building. How to make that a green energy source. He had all sorts of ideas about lighting. Loading docks on the back of a building that would be bringing industrial materials. And places in the back of the building that you wouldn't see from the front where the makers could spread out and make a mess and hammer away and do what they need to do outside. And maybe an awning so they can stay outside longer even if it's raining. Like a pavilion rooftop, so the work could go on outside underneath a roof.

Charles has such great ideas. I'd like to see him be able to build a building and move all of his makers into that space. But the city has a vision for having people being able to come and see makers doing the work that they make, and maybe some shared studio space. My idea is in the front of these buildings where makers are working would be sort of like Church Street, a gathering place, a destination point where people would be coming over off the bike path to have a bite to eat, to have a place to sit, to hear musicians playing outside...around the makers space.

In Portsmouth New Hampshire in the old section of town, they have a ship maker, a candle maker, a potter, a soap maker. These are the artist who would be the makers 150 years ago. It's a tourist attraction. Its like an outdoor community museum. Starbridge village would be an example of that.

Something that would be an attraction point because there's restaurants, you can look at the work being done, people on vacation on the bike path it would be a little draw for them to come over. Maybe they can pick up somebody's card and they can order for their store. It would be a source of new business. Its like, how many artists are just making art just because it's in them and they want to make it. They also have to make a living, and how do we support that?

And does our community have some kind of marketing for some of these makers? How do we market our makers? I know the VT Department of Tourism has a map. A cheese tour. A map of all the little farms dotted across Vermont that make cheese. You could go visit their little store, their little farm and by cheese and other produce. It was a tourist attraction. I lived in western Mass, I did it once with a couple of girlfriends, and stayed in bed and breakfasts. After a weekend of eating bread and cheese we decided next time we'd bring bikes, because we have to work this off some how.

One of the artists came to our meetings and said its really hard fro artists to set up outdoor vending places to sell their art on Church Street. Wouldn't it be great if this was where they could set up their little outdoor vending studios to sell their art, in some little public space in this neck of the woods.

When I was in Quebec City, there was this nasty little alley between two buildings. The artists set up in there when the weathers good and hang their pictures on the

wall. People are just walking through this alley and it's a well-known place to get art by local artists. And it's just an alley with some awnings. And some of them don't even have awnings; they've just rigged up some plastic. It's a cool little spot.

I don't think our city capitalizes on our history like Quebec does. When I first moved here I discovered that hallway in the building where Skinny Pancake is. It has this mural of all those wild animals. And somewhere else there is a hallway that had historical pictures of the fire that happened in that block.

The other thing when I went to Quebec City, I stayed in a hotel on the 6th floor, and it had an incredible view of the nighttime lights. They celebrated a centennial anniversary in 2008, and in preparation for all the visitors that would be coming, they put out a call for building owners to spruce up the lighting on their building to enhance the night time view of visitors that would be there. For one example, there's a row of grain silos down on the waterfront. I didn't get to see them during the day...they're probably an eyesore during the day. There's probably 8-12 grain silos, but at night time, they have a lighting show going on on them. And there's lights from the top shining down and lights from the bottom shining up. And they gradually fade from one color to the next: Blue to magenta; pink to green. From my hotel window it was fascinating to watch this light show happening. And then there was this museum that had every window in the museum, and it was in a historical building, had a similar kind of...the lights were changing in every window. They probably weren't using the windows for daylight coming in. But at night simultaneously all the windows were changing colors at the same time. And there were some buildings where the tops of them were light up in different ways that were just beautiful.

So, somebody had the creative lighting talent to create this kind of lighting display. I'm sure they hired workers to do this and it increased the local economy.

I hope when we get to the point where we have a plan for redevelopment and were hiring contractors to do some of this work that were not just putting it out to the lowest bidder from Connecticut and that were willing to pay a little bit more money for local artists who are going to design something really unique that is going to be a draw, and that they get additional work from that.

Explanation of livable wage ordinance

At least provide money to commission some public art so that the people that are here get to showcase what they do. Last night I went out for the first time at night to Radio Bean and they have a new little lighting store there...I don't know who owns it. It was awesome, I was so awed when I went inside. They had these little nooks of seating and lighting. I was so awed by the bathroom that I took two pictures and posting them to my facebook page. And one was the ceiling. It was this mosaic of hand done copper work with this really unique lighting hanging from it. It was the most incredible beautiful thing I'd ever seen. It was like being in the Sistine Chapel.

And then you looked down and its sort of this hole in the wall toilet and sink. It was like an expose on contrast. Very interesting. If I had a little shop in New York City I would be wanting the card of the person who designed that ceiling, because I would want one. This kind of showcase of our local talent in spots where these people can get commissioned work from people in other cities and other states and other countries.

Back to inclusivity in general...

I understand that Burlington is a refugee resettlement community, and so what are some of the challenges that I see around that?

One is from a public housing stance. I live in a building with 36 apartments, and we have several refugee families who speak different languages in this building. One of the concerns from our tenants association was that any signage that is put up should be translated into the language of whoever is living here. Also, my neighbor who is from Somalia...it's very isolating when you live in an apartment building and no one else in this building speaks your language. Maybe this would be against the discrimination laws, but I think she, and I'm speaking for my neighbor who speaks Somali, would love it if there were a couple of other tenants in this building who spoke here language instead of having three refugee families who speak different languages from different countries. I think in public housing it would be more helpful to those refugees if there were other tenants who spoke their language that lived here. It would make them so they don't feel so isolated. Often times what you have is an older generation that doesn't speak any English at all, and you have the kids that are in the school system and they're the interpreters. So it would really help, I think, if they grouped more people of similar languages together, instead of spreading it out so thin. Maybe that would be considered discriminatory. I don't know if it would be or not. But from a practical standpoint it would be helpful.

My neighbors say they go to their market place in the north end that sells their kind of stuff...she bough her couch there. I was saying, "oh I love your couch, I've never seen a couch like that before" but it was stocked in her market. I think it would be great if some of the markets that were catering to the kinds of foods that people from these countries were used to eating...If they had a little eatery in the front where they were selling...sort of like a grocery store with a little café built in. And also a deli, that had their particular prepared foods that, hey, I could stop in after work and get a couple pints of things to go and that could be my supper.

