

BALE is Building a Local Economy

By Abbey Willard

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In the realm of Vermont agriculture, what could be more important than Building Soil, Building Community and Building a Local Economy"? BALE (Building A Local Economy) is a community resource center located in the upper White River Valley that is bringing focus to the ways our local agricultural communities can build social, economic, and cultural resiliency. If you talk with Chris Wood, Director of BALE, he will claim a local economy is greater than a healthy food system. It includes exploration of local currency, development of community radio, local energy sources, and local transportation systems.

On June 7, BALE staff, board members, and copious volunteers held its 2nd annual **BALE Fest: A Celebration of All Things Local** on the South Royalton Green. The event takes the form of a grand expansion of the weekly Farmers Market held each Thursday afternoon through the summer. Nearly 1,000 people enjoyed this community celebration for the region, drawing folks from a dozen area towns; a true display of the community resources that are available in the White River Valley. An educational component featured eight workshops and a half-dozen demonstrations on everything from grease-powered vehicles to controlling invasive plants that Tropical Storm Irene had dispersed in the Valley. BALE Fest was certainly a celebration focused on education but with a social mission to bring a sense of community and connection so essential for creative development and engagement.

In collaboration with Valley Food and Farm, BALE organized the first **New Farmer Meet-Up** at a local restaurant in South Royalton in late May. 35 aspiring or beginning farmers attended the lively gathering that featured a talk by Christopher Piana of Fable Farm in Barnard. Representatives from the UVM Extension New Farmer Program and Land for Good were also in attendance to provide resources to beginning farmers. The goal of this initiative was to identify new and interested farmers in the region and to offer them an opportunity to meet each other and to share what information, resources, and skills they need in order to succeed.

This summer, BALE's **2012 Locally Grown Guide** is available around the region. This free guide to area farms and local food marketers will include all farms, farm stands, farmers markets, value-added businesses, retail stores, inns and restaurants that sell or market food produced in the White River Valley. 10,000 copies will be distributed throughout the Valley over the summer and inserted in the July 12 issue of *The Herald of Randolph*, the weekly newspaper of the region. The farm listings included in the printed guide are also available on the fully searchable website www.vermontgrowersguide.com, maintained by the UVM Center for Rural Studies. Planning is already underway for the 2013 edition and anyone who wants to be added should contact BALE at info@balevt.org.

Working in collaboration with Randolph Area Community Development Corporation, BALE has received funding to develop the **White River Valley Regional Website**, an interactive web portal to access all information on towns, businesses, nonprofits and people of the White River Valley. The website design creates opportunities for marketing of local ag products to the public and for farmers to share resources and information.

Over the past two years, BALE has utilized local engagement through education, communication, and networking to build soil, build community, and effectively build a local economy. Initial efforts are focused on supporting the vibrant agricultural interests in the White River Valley but activities are planned around that broader scope of building a local economy. In order to have a visible, physical presence, BALE has opened a "community space" in a storefront on the Green in South

Royalton, where community meetings, educational programs and even a weekly music jam takes place. BALE is working to tie together all the elements of a stronger local economy. Starting in the Fall, a public education series called “Why Build A Local Economy” will be held in several towns in the White River Valley with the goal of examining the many reasons that building local economic infrastructure will also build resilience and community vitality in the future. For more information or to become involved, please contact Chris Wood at chris@balevt.org.