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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Nice work, Rob. I added some info about ownership of the properties. Please double check carefully. Thanks! —J

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 After 15 years of planning, a BF food co-op eyes a major  
2 milestone

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####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 Great River Co-op and the Great Falls Food Hub will find  
4 out in the fall if construction can proceed

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

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6 It has been nearly 15 years since the idea first started  
7 taking shape, and finally, this fall, the Great River Food Co-op  
8 will find out if construction can begin at the site of the former  
9 Robertson Paper Mill.

10 The co-op describes itself as a “start-up cooperative  
11 dedicated to enhancing food safety and security by creating a

12 local food ecosystem that directly connects local farmers and  
13 producers with consumers” in both Vermont and New Hampshire  
14 along the lower Connecticut River valley.

15 The preliminary design being considered for the co-op  
16 includes a 6,000-square-foot retail food cooperative, and 20,000  
17 square feet of production, refrigeration, and freezer space  
18 available for local farmers.

19 Gary Fox, Bellows Falls’ development director and a  
20 volunteer director of the Sustainable Valley Group (SVG), said  
21 that a \$136,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture  
22 (USDA) is funding the preliminary work of deciding on a site and  
23 creating a design for the facility and a business plan for running  
24 the co-op.

25 SVG is one of the main organizers of the Great River Co-  
26 op.

27 The seeds for a local cooperative were planted in 2011  
28 when citizens from Walpole and Westmoreland in New  
29 Hampshire and Rockingham and Westminster in Vermont began  
30 discussing the idea.

31 Local farmers were the driving force behind the  
32 discussion.

33 Large food chains would not sell the seasonal crops from  
34 small farms, whereas a local food cooperative would provide  
35 them with a steady market. Nearly 50 area farmers responded to  
36 the original area surveys regarding the co-op.

37 They supported the idea, and membership, grew quickly  
38 to several hundred people.

39 “They did a lot of planning and held annual meetings,”  
40 said Fox.

41 At first the organizers envisioned the co-op in Walpole,  
42 and for about a decade, a large sign at a field on Route 12  
43 declared it the “future home of the Great River Co-op,” Fox said.  
44 “They even published a newsletter.”

45 But after several years, “it fizzled out,” he said.

“The whole thing ended with the Covid outbreak. Most of the board members left,” Fox said.

But the idea of a local food cooperative, perhaps including food storage and processing facilities for local farmers, was resurrected in 2023, this time centered on locating the facility on the Vermont side of the river in Bellows Falls.

By 2024, Fox said, the resuscitated group had selected a new board of directors and begun strategic planning.

“This time, though, we were talking about a food hub with processing facilities and refrigeration and freezer storage for local farmers, and a retail food store, and doing it all together at the same time,” he said.

In a letter from the board to interested citizens, the organization’s leaders wrote, “The Co-op is looking forward, not dwelling on its past. We have 100% revamped our vision and focus to be the frontline of local sustainable food in the Great River region. Let your neighbors know we are here to stay.”

## A prime location

Board members asked business owners, farmers, and teachers for input and to volunteer to move the project along.

The response has been very good, Fox said. More than 60 people showed up at the first Great River Co-op public meeting.

One key property, 21 Island St. in Bellows Falls — the site of the former Robertson Paper Mill building — began to emerge as a prime location for the cooperative.

The commercial property is 58,000 square feet and an ideal location, Fox said.

Despite earlier efforts to redevelop the historic mill buildings on the site, in 2018 and 2019 the structures were taken down. The contaminated brownfield soils were either removed or contained.

The Robinson tract is owned by Island Holdings, LLC, a corporate entity that is owned in turn by the Bellows Falls Area

80 Development Corporation. Fox, as the town's development  
81 director, also serves as executive director for the business  
82 development nonprofit.

83 Sustainable Valley Group owns another building at 30  
84 Island St., directly across from the former paper mill site, and it is  
85 already being used as an incubator food business site. Fox said  
86 SVG had been looking for new businesses to move into the  
87 building since two previous tenants' enterprises failed in 2017.

88 The Vermont Economic Development Authority (VEDA),  
89 which is helping with funding for the Co-op project, wanted  
90 value-added food businesses in the building. Two local  
91 businesses, Smokin' Bowls, a food truck and catering business,  
92 and C&K Foods, a business that processes, packages, and labels  
93 sauces, have successfully moved in.

94 With a food processing facility already next door, Fox  
95 said, "there is a lot of fertile ground in the area" for this sort of  
96 farm-to-table venture.

97 The 21 Island St. site is a five-minute walk from at least  
98 four of the main apartment complexes in Bellows Falls and a  
99 short drive from the surrounding communities in Vermont and  
100 New Hampshire.

## 101 **Planning for funds, funding the** 102 **plans**

103 The USDA grant is funding the preliminary development  
104 work.

105 "We can't just run on volunteers," Fox said. "At some  
106 point you have to have hired staff. We're looking for grants to  
107 help with that as well. Then people can focus their energy on the  
108 primary work of running the co-op."

109 That planning is expected to be completed by October.

110 "Then we'll take the information from those studies and  
111 use it to apply for funding," Fox said. He added that they would  
112 be applying "for all possible grants," including from the USDA,

113 the Northern Border Regional Commission (NRBC), and the New  
114 Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) program.

115 NRBC is a federal and state partnership created in 2008  
116 to support economic development in distressed rural regions of  
117 Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York.

118 The NMTC program, part of the U.S. Department of the  
119 Treasury's Community Development Financial Institutions Fund,  
120 is designed to attract private investment and gap funding to low-  
121 income communities. Two-thirds of the population in Bellows  
122 Falls are considered low income.

123 The NMTC program alone could provide up to a third of  
124 the project funding, Fox said. He also noted that the program also  
125 wants to see housing as a project component, so that will be  
126 taken into consideration in the design work.

127 Fox noted that both the Brattleboro Food Co-op and the  
128 Monadnock Food Co-op in Keene, New Hampshire, include  
129 several housing units.

130 If the funding falls into place, Fox said, construction  
131 could begin in the spring of 2027 or 2028.

132 "It's going to take a couple of years to get members," Fox  
133 said. "It takes a lot of work to build the membership and energy  
134 to make this successful."

## 135 A food hub picks up steam

136 Fox said that educating the local communities about  
137 farm-to-table programs, cooking healthy meals, and getting  
138 young people involved is vital. To that end, other volunteers have  
139 created the Great Falls Food Hub.

140 Aimee Parnell, the former director of the Great Falls  
141 Regional Chamber of Commerce, is one of the organizers of the  
142 Food Hub. Its purpose is to connect the region's people with area  
143 farmers and teach them to create healthy meals.

144 Working alongside other regional food programs, such as  
145 Brattleboro's Food Connects, the Food Hub is using area farmers

146 markets and community gardens at area schools as part of its  
147 education program.

148 In one program, Food Hub brings in volunteers between  
149 the ages of 10 and 20 to work with area chefs such as David  
150 Groenwold, a former River Valley Technical Center culinary arts  
151 instructor.

152 Groenwold takes the volunteers shopping at farmers  
153 markets in Townshend, Bellows Falls, and Putney, and then he  
154 teaches them how to design and prepare healthy meals from fresh  
155 produce.

156 Parnell said that just since June the Food Hub's website  
157 has had over 34,000 visits, and its social media channels have  
158 seen a more-than-1,700% increase in followers.

159 Fox and Parnell said that educating local families on how  
160 to shop for and prepare locally grown, healthy food will be key to  
161 the success of the cooperative.

162 "We're not just building a cooperative on paper over the  
163 next year or two," Fox said. "We're also building the community  
164 support."

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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165 For more information, visit [greatriverfoodcoop.com](http://greatriverfoodcoop.com).

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