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Chester grassroots effort wins USDA grant

CHESTER, VERMONT, 28 May 2010. -- The U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development has announced that a grassroots effort lead by the Chester Farmers Market, with support from the Chester Economic Development Corporation, has won a \$30,000 Rural Business Enterprise Grant.

The grant will be used to promote Chester in 2011, when two bridges on Route 103 will be shut down for reconstruction. The state will detour traffic on I-91 around Chester for as long as 12 weeks, resulting in a marked loss of revenue for most of Chester's businesses and the possible loss of jobs for their employees.

The grant project, dubbed "Chester United," aims to help recapture tourism lost to the reconstruction by marketing the town as a destination. This involves "branding" Chester - including a logo - to make the town readily identifiable to visitors. With a website, maps, publicity and advertising, Chester United aims to bring attention to the many things to do and see in Chester including a host of ongoing community sponsored events. In addition, the project will encourage organizations to stage events that will attract visitors. One stroke of good luck is that 2011 is the 250th anniversary of the founding of Chester and a great opportunity to invite the world to come and celebrate.

To date, farmers market president Cynthia Prairie, who heads the effort, and others have raised matching pledges of cash and in-kind services of more than \$19,000, bringing the project total to nearly \$50,000. At the March Town Meeting, Chester residents voted to add \$1,000 to the matching fund. Besides the Chester Farmers Market, other sponsors include the Vermont Country Store, Bryant Credit Union, the Chester Rotary, Chittenden Bank, the Motel in the Meadow, Curtis' All-American BBQ and many more individuals and businesses.

A "Donors Conference," where those who have pledged and those who want to contribute can come together to celebrate and write checks, is being planned for June. All are welcome to attend, find out more about the project and donate funds. An informational meeting is being planned for June as well.

The Rural Business Enterprise Grant, which will be administered by the Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission, was awarded in a competitive process in which applicants are scored based on established criteria.

For more information on Chester United, or to volunteer to help in the effort, call Cynthia Prairie at 802-875-2703.