

## STARКСBORO EMBARKS ON "ART & SOUL" COMMUNITY PLANNING VENTURE

*The Addison County town will host a storytelling, art, and community civic engagement project through a unique partnership with the Orton Family Foundation and the Vermont Land Trust.*

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**MIDDLEBURY, VT**— Citizens of Starksboro, Vermont, will notice some new faces on the roads this fall – college students with notepads and microphones asking them to tell stories of what they value about Starksboro and what they want for its future. This winter, an artist in residence working with the community will turn those stories into works of art.



The Town of Starksboro is visible from the Rublee Farm – one of the remaining farms that is central to the Town's rural character.

Starksboro has been selected to participate in the "Art & Soul Civic Engagement" project – a joint initiative of the Orton Family Foundation and the Vermont Land Trust that will explore ways of using the arts to engage citizens, discover the community assets that citizens value most, and implement strategies for protecting those assets in the future.

Late last spring, the Foundation and the Land Trust issued a Call for Community Proposals to Addison County, Vermont, towns eager to collaborate on this new approach to community engagement. More than 50 people from eleven towns responded by attending two information sessions, and six communities submitted applications, all of which offered strong examples of how Vermont citizens are committed to community vitality. After much deliberation, the town of Starksboro, located in western Vermont between Middlebury and Burlington, was selected.

"Starksboro has been using the arts to broadly engage students in their elementary school for years," said Betsy Rosenbluth, Orton's Northeast Projects Director. "Now, they'd like to apply that successful model to engage the entire community in conversation about future directions for the town, and then use that information to celebrate their local heroes and guide their town plan."

Although Starksboro is home to fewer than 2000 people, it encompasses many of the issues and qualities found in Vermont as a whole. With more than 16,000 acres of core forest; eight thriving farms and a maple sugaring industry; and a history of strong citizen involvement in conservation programs, historic preservation, and the elementary school, Starksboro residents already treasure many aspects of their rural community. At the same time, Starksboro is faced with significant growth pressure, an aging population, and one of the highest per capita densities of low income housing in the State. The sponsoring organizations see the Art & Soul project as a way to help Starksboro – and eventually other communities – bring together a diverse citizenry, protect the assets they most value, and continue to grow and change in ways that are inclusive of and amenable to its citizens.

“VLT has worked with many communities in Vermont on local conservation efforts and we have seen first-hand the benefits to citizens when they make choices about the future of their town,” said Elise Annes, Vice President for Community Relations at the Vermont Land Trust. “When a community comes together to protect something special – whether it is a piece of land or other local asset – there is no limit to their creativity.”

The Art & Soul project includes three distinct phases. First, in a Middlebury College class led by Professor John Elder, students will collect citizens’ stories and share them with the community at a town-wide celebration in December.

Next, a Vermont Artist in Residence to be selected this fall will work with local groups to explore and reflect the values and community character elicited by the storytelling phase through art and dialogue that could include painting, quilting, dance, music, theater, photography, sculpture, writing or video. The goal is to include as many Starksboro residents as possible of all ages – elected officials and landowners, shopkeepers and schoolchildren, old timers and new comers– in addressing the opportunities and challenges of the community.

Finally, citizens will identify concrete actions that are priorities for shaping the future of Starksboro. The Foundation will support the community in implementing those actions through additional funding and technical assistance. The Orton Family Foundation will be issuing a Call for Artists early this fall and information will follow about events and results of the project. Visit [www.orton.org](http://www.orton.org) for more information.

*The [Orton Family Foundation](http://www.orton.org), based in Middlebury, Vermont, and Denver, Colorado, seeks to help small cities and towns discover and describe their heart and soul—the collective attributes that make communities unique—and build on those attributes in planning toward a vibrant, enduring future.*

*The [Vermont Land Trust](http://www.vltrust.org) is a statewide, member-supported, nonprofit land conservation organization. Since 1977, the Vermont Land Trust has*

*permanently conserved more than 470,000 acres, or about eight percent of the private, undeveloped land in the state. The conserved land includes more than 650 working farms, hundreds of thousands of acres of productive forestland, and numerous parcels of community lands. This conservation work changes the lives of families, invigorates farms, launches new businesses, maintains scenic vistas, encourages recreational opportunity, and fosters a renewed sense of community.*

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