

Feeling It

By MATT CRAWFORD
Photographed by
JERRY SWOPE

The vibe is different now in St. Albans, after a turnaround four decades in the making

THIS STORY starts with a retired couple from suburban Maryland spending part of their autumn in Vermont, visiting their grandchildren and soaking in the fall colors. One of their grandsons is a high school sophomore who just happens to have a junior varsity football game one Monday night at BFA-St. Albans. Being good grandparents, the couple drive to St. Albans from Middlebury to see their grandson play. The football field is on the eastern fringe of town, a bit more than a long field goal attempt from the Interstate 89 exit; so before the game, the grandparents head into St. Albans proper for a bite to eat. And there, while looking over the menu at Maple City Diner, the retired couple begin listing their observations of St. Albans.

It's vibrant. It's quaint. It has a well-maintained village green. It has a downtown with open retail stores. St. Albans, they opine,

might be the quintessential classic New England small town — a pleasant, thriving community with church steeples and a bike path and a cutely named diner that gives a nod to the area's iconic agricultural heritage.

I retell the story of the Maryland couple's visit to Dominic Cloud, manager of St. Albans City, as we sit in his office one morning. He grins.

"I hear various versions of that story quite often," he says. "It's always good to hear. It's a testament to the hard work that's gone

“We had put ourselves in position to take action.”

on around here, but it's certainly not something that was being said about St. Albans 10 or 15 years ago.”

No. Not by a long shot. The thriving St. Albans of today barely resembles the hardscrabble, blue-collar city of a decade ago where downtown storefronts had a 60 percent vacancy rate, crime was increasing, and city government was so cash-strapped it could barely

afford regular upkeep on sidewalks and roads. Back then, saying you were from St. Albans opened yourself up for ribbing: You were a ruffian. A rube. I was born in St. Albans in 1966, graduated from high school there in 1984, and spent the early parts of my career working at newspapers in northern Vermont. People picked on my hometown. Franklin County in general, and St. Albans in particular, almost always got a bad rap.

There were certainly elements of truth in the seedy reputation. In 1969, the Northwest State Correctional Facility opened on the outskirts of town. Unlike Burlington, Northfield, Middlebury, or Bennington — all college towns — St. Albans inherited the prejudices that go with being a prison town. In the mid-1970s, St. Albans' leaders hired an undercover narcotics police officer named Paul Lawrence to clean up the town's burgeoning drug problem, but a larger community PR nightmare ensued after Lawrence himself wound up behind bars for making hundreds of fraudulent drug arrests. In a 1976 story about Lawrence, *The New York Times* referred to St.

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of Clark's House
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PARKING GARAGE →

1 HOUR
PARKING
\$20-1PM
\$10-11PM
\$5-11:59PM
\$10-11:59PM





ABOVE Julie Thommes has a snack with her daughter Aubri Richards at a coffeehouse on Main Street. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Twiggs American Gastropub owner Tom Murphy (right) rode out tough times before the turnaround; family and friends enjoy their backyard at a new housing development; inside Catalyst Coffee Bar; more affordable home prices offer a step up; cruising through the farmers market.

Albans as a “quiet backwater near the Canadian border.” In 1980, Mayor Janet Smith was shot to death by a handyman who lived with her, less than a week after she took office. By the mid-2000s, St. Albans police,

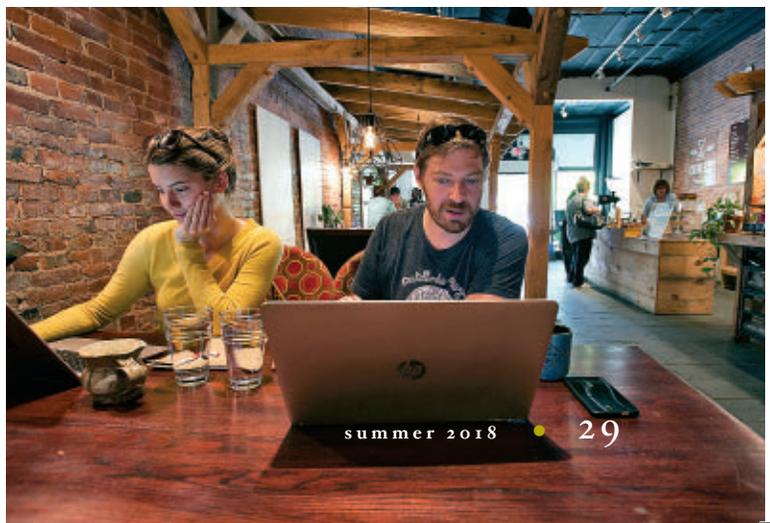
politicians, and medical officials made loud public cries for help in combating the opioid addiction that wracked the area. The public acknowledgment of that problem served as another body blow to the community’s image.

“I can remember standing outside in 2011 like a carnival barker trying to get people to come into my restaurant,” said Tom Murphy, owner of Twiggs American Gastropub, located smack-dab in the middle of St. Albans. “It was a dead, small-town main street with absolutely nothing going for it.”

FOR A GLIMPSE of just how far St. Albans has come, consider this anecdote: Tim Smith is the executive director of the Franklin County Industrial Development Corp., a private, nonprofit organization that helps spearhead business growth in northwestern Vermont. Smith is a deeply rooted St. Albans native. A 1978 graduate of BFA-St. Albans, his family once owned a popular restaurant in the city, and today, his other family members are prominent business leaders in the area. He also became St. Albans’ mayor in March — a part-time position with no salary. Smith tells the story of a recent economic development seminar he attended. “Here I am in a room with 250 bankers and



“ Here I am in a room with 250 bankers and business leaders, and St. Albans is being held up as a poster child for the rest of the state. I’m just sitting there filling with immense pride. ”





business leaders, and St. Albans is being held up as a poster child for the rest of the state,” Smith said. “I’m just sitting there filling with immense pride.”

The business leaders at Smith’s seminar, like

the out-of-state visitors at the diner, are seeing a transformed St. Albans. The downtown is lively, with shops, restaurants, and a new hotel, and it looks better, enhanced by a \$3 million streetscaping project.

Two major employers, Mylan Technologies and Northwestern Medical Center, employ about 1,450 people combined, who all work within walking distance of downtown. The hospital recently completed a \$32 million expansion, and Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream completed construction of a 45,000-square-foot expansion to its manufacturing facility, adding 65 new jobs.

Unemployment in the area has declined from more than 10 percent in 2009 to under 4 percent today. Another three-part revitalization project on Main Street, this one estimated at \$20 million, was announced in January.

ABOVE Jesse Lawyer and his daughter Charlotte stroll through Catalyst Coffee Bar.

LEFT Landscaping touches, part of a \$3 million improvement project.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Debbie LaForce, who moved to St. Albans two years ago, works on a floral display outside her home; Will and Kate Howrigan with their daughter Ruth enjoy a sidewalk café; Vermont musician Mark LeGrand performs on a Saturday evening.



“Between 2017 and the end of 2018, we should see somewhere in the neighborhood of \$150 million in construction and capital improvement in Franklin County,” said Smith. Not all of that is in St. Albans, Smith said. That counts projects in nearby Enosburgh and Swanton, but for the most part, the surrounding towns are fortunately caught in the

prop wash of St. Albans steaming straight ahead.

FOR A LONG TIME, St. Albans was a town badly in need of a transformation. People were keenly aware of that fact. As early as 1981, about the time the unemployment rate for St. Albans was inching toward 15 percent, city and state officials put forth a “Downtown Revitalization

Plan” for St. Albans. But there were several big hurdles. First, there was not an overabundance of jobs in the immediate area — skilled workers migrated out of St. Albans each day for better-paying jobs in Chittenden County. Second, St. Albans lacked the water and sewer infrastructure needed to attract meaningful industry and development.

And then, in 1993, Wal-

mart came sniffing around.

The saga of Walmart’s bid to locate a store on the northern edge of St. Albans, some two miles outside of the city’s center, literally has filled books — most of them motions, rulings, and subsequent appeals in a variety of courts. The “nation’s longest Walmart fight” was chronicled by the St. Albans Messenger in

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news stories that detailed snail-paced court proceedings. What started in 1993 ended in October 2013 when the St. Albans Walmart opened its doors to a jubilant crowd of eager shoppers, some of whom had camped overnight in the parking lot to be among the first to enter the new store.

While the Walmart fight inched along through the court system, a number of St. Albans residents, well aware that Walmart doesn't lose many fights, began to prepare for the looming, inevitable conclusion. Long-serving city manager William Cioffi (he held the office from 1984–2003) had already helped lead efforts to upgrade the city's wastewater treatment facilities. Marty Manahan (mayor from 2006–2012) and Liz Gamache (mayor from 2012–2018) worked on brokering deals that would be beneficial to existing downtown businesses. Manahan was a central figure in negotiations with Jeff Davis, the Chittenden County-based Walmart developer, who agreed to spend \$2.2 million to buy and renovate four buildings in the core of St. Albans City and place \$450,000 in a reserve fund that the city would use for future downtown redevelopment projects.

"We had a pretty good sense we could work with Jeff Davis," said Manahan. "We could have simply fought the process, or we could try to mold the process in a way where Walmart got its store and downtown St. Albans received some financial help implementing our vision and protecting our downtown."

Along about that time, St. Albans created a "tax-increment financing district" (a TIF district) — a wonky property tax diversion program that allows municipalities to use specific tax revenue to help fund public infrastructure projects in a defined part of town. Cloud, who took over as St. Albans City manager in 2008, says the TIF gave the city access to large amounts of cash that are needed to help finance redevelopment projects.



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St. Albans' drug and crime problems were also addressed. The St. Albans Police Department had 16 officers in 2008, but that number has increased to 24 today, a force that now serves both St. Albans City and Town (with a combined population of 14,000 people). As in many parts of the state, and across the country, St. Albans' opioid problem remains, but today several community initiatives that include police, the court system, the recreation department, and mental health professionals are dovetailed to provide a more comprehensive approach. "Some of our business leaders were very worried about us talking openly about the area's drug problem," said Gamache. "But it was a complicated issue, and it wasn't going to go away." The result of shining a spotlight onto what had been previously discussed only in hushed tones, said Gamache, was a collaborative effort to confront the problem.

As the city stabilized, said Cloud, its economy strengthened and gathered momentum. Both public and private organizations became more comfortable with the risks of new development. Mylan Technologies, the pharmaceutical manufacturer located downtown, made a commitment to stay. The federal government expanded a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office in St. Albans. About 150 employees from the Vermont Agency of Human Services and Department of Labor work in a new building in the heart of the city — a building that opened in 2015 and was built, in part, through money raised in the TIF program.

Gradually, St. Albans became a more attractive place to live, especially for people who worked in nearby Chittenden County but wanted less expensive houses. Construction of new homes also picked up. "There's no question, being so close to Burlington is a factor in all of this," said former mayor Gamache, "but as a community, we were in the right position philosophically too. We had put ourselves in position to take action."

IN TALKING TO numerous sources for this story, one theme crystallized for me: There is not one single person, or one single event, that gets credit for St. Albans' metamorphosis. It was as much the work of Vermont's delegation in Washington as the work of St. Albans' City Council. It is as much the dedication of Gamache as the diligence of restaurateurs like Tom Murphy. Dominic Cloud, who came aboard as city manager in 2008, certainly deserves mention. He helped clean up the city's finances, was instrumental in designing the TIF program, was deeply involved in negotiations with Walmart, has helped broker deals with developers for recent downtown construction projects, and helped secure federal downtown improvement grants. He cajoled local banks when traditional funding sources for municipal capital investment initiatives dried up.

There are several emerging projects just now hatching — a redesign of Taylor Park in the center of the city and an expansion of a recreational facility chief among them — that consume some of Cloud's time. "We tried a lot of things to make it all work," said Cloud. "A lot of it was just like picking lures out of the tackle box to see what was going to work. Sometimes we caught fish, sometimes we got skunked."

There is, of course, more work to do. "We have to continue moving forward," said Cloud. "There's no question this place feels differently now. There's a vibe here that people who lived here their entire lives have never felt before. But if we don't keep making improvements, this could all go away."

Gamache says the St. Albans of 2018 has exceeded all the expectations she had for it when revitalization efforts began. "When you look back at how much the community was ready for a change, how much willingness there was to improve, I knew we'd make good progress," Gamache said. "We did what we envisioned and so much more." 🌟



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