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Notes from editor (not for publication):

—“McBride said it will be interesting to see how each site presents their version of the exhibit.” I’m guessing that each site is not changing the exhibit’s content, but that Robert means the programming and promotion around the exhibit and the community discussion in response to it. I’ve edited accordingly, but this will be spectacularly wrong decision if I’ve misinterpreted his quote. Please check my work carefully here.

—I’ve transposed McBride’s comments to the end to bring it back to looking at the future here.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Smithsonian brings special traveling exhibit to Bellows

2 Falls

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 ‘Spark!’ seeks to inspire rural communities and be ‘the
4 springboard for diverse local programming in the humanities,
5 sciences, and arts’

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 A multimedia exhibit on how rural communities across
8 the country have creatively responded to economic and social
9 challenges, created by the Smithsonian Institution, had its soft
10 opening at the Rockingham Free Public Library (RFPL) on June
11 16. A grand opening and open house will be held Saturday, June
12 27.

13 After its start in Bellows Falls, the exhibit moves on to
14 five other libraries, historical societies, and museums throughout
15 Vermont and New Hampshire.

16 Three sites in each state will host the exhibit for six
17 weeks each: Barnet Public Library (July and August); Swanton
18 Public Library (September and October); Berlin (New Hampshire)
19 Historical Society (November and December); and Mariposa
20 Museum, Peterborough, New Hampshire (January and February
21 2027), and the Canaan (New Hampshire) Historical Society
22 (February and March 2027).

23 The upstairs meeting room of the Rockingham Free
24 Public Library looked like backstage at a rock concert last week
25 as the library prepared for the first showing of the exhibition, a
26 partnership with the Vermont Humanities and New Hampshire
27 Humanities.

28 It takes 11 large rolling crates, each carrying hundreds of
29 pounds of the display, along with detailed instructions on how to
30 put it together. A large box truck moves the display from site to
31 site.

32 Robbie Davis, project director for digital programs at the
33 Museum on Main Street at the Smithsonian, the division of the
34 museum that offers traveling exhibitions, was on hand to oversee
35 and instruct approximately 20 people at RFPL on how to put the
36 display together.

37 The Museum on Main Street program “brings
38 professionally designed, developed, curated, and constructed
39 museum exhibits to small towns across the United States,” said
40 RFPL Director Ian Graham.

41 Some were local volunteers doing the actual assembling
42 for the Bellows Falls show. With Smithsonian staff overseeing that
43 work only at this first showing, the rest were staff from the other
44 exhibit sites who came to learn how to unpack, assemble, tear
45 down, and re-crate the extensive display.

46 Setting the displays up properly — and, in particular,
47 getting power to each of the interactive, multimedia kiosks —
48 will be a special challenge for some of the rural and older
49 Vermont and New Hampshire display sites, organizers said.

50 **‘You always say yes’**

51 Inspired by an exhibition by the Smithsonian’s Lemelson
52 Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation, “Spark!”
53 features stories gathered from diverse communities across the
54 nation, including Bethel, Vermont.

55 Using examples from Taos, New Mexico, to
56 Independence, Oregon, “Spark!” highlights how communities
57 have adapted creatively to changes using technology, the town’s
58 geography, infrastructure, architecture, history, culture, and art, to
59 create new opportunities for work and education for all, and
60 especially young people.

61 Robert McBride, the founder and director of the
62 Rockingham Arts and Museum Project (RAMP), said he was
63 contacted by the two state humanities organizations asking if he
64 would like to host the first showing of the exhibition in Bellows
65 Falls.

66 He said he immediately understood how large and
67 important the exhibit would be for Bellows Falls.

68 “You always say yes to such a great opportunity being
69 offered to your community,” McBride said. “It came to us. Now
70 it’s up to us to take advantage of it.”

71 He said he talked with Graham, and they agreed that the
72 library’s upstairs meeting room would be an ideal location for the
73 exhibit.

74 “The library considers it a great honor to be able to not
75 only provide local and not-so-local folks access to a Smithsonian
76 exhibit but to be the first in Vermont to host ‘Spark!’,” he said.

77 Graham said that the library has “stretched our hours a
78 bit,” opening on some Sunday afternoons.

79 Working with Vermont Humanities, New Hampshire
80 Humanities, the Smithsonian, and representatives from the five
81 additional institutions in Vermont and New Hampshire that will
82 also host the exhibit “has been lots of fun,” he said.

83 The exhibit has “also has created new partnerships that
84 we expect will bring many more exciting opportunities to
85 Rockingham, Vermont, and New Hampshire in the future,”
86 Graham added.

87 **Building community in Bethel**

88 The exhibit highlights the Bethel Revitalization Initiative
89 (BRI), a grassroots program started in 2013 in Bethel, a small
90 Windsor County town of 2,000.

91 The group’s first effort was small, turning a “weedy,
92 overgrown lot” into a small “pocket park with a view of the river.”
93 A handful of volunteers with a few hand tools made it happen.

94 BRI next established Bethel University, a “free,
95 community, pop-up” program that invited local people to teach
96 any topic they wanted for a month. They began with volunteers
97 teaching 21 classes that ranged from “bread making to
98 blacksmithing.”

99 By the third year, more than 1,000 students were coming
100 in from around the region for dozens of free classes, including
101 basic Spanish and French to beer making, square dancing,
102 cartooning, tarot reading, and photography basic car
103 maintenance.

104 The exhibit highlights BRI as one of many of examples of
105 the “Spark!” effect in small, rural towns — a handful of
106 community members innovating on the pop-up model, taking
107 quick action, with little or no expense, and creating programs

108 that have helped thousands of participants. The Bethel University
109 program continues to grow and thrive.

110 “‘Spark! Places of Innovation’ will be the springboard for
111 diverse local programming in the humanities, sciences, and arts,”
112 the Smithsonian said in its description of the program.

113 “Visitors will be inspired to learn about how innovation
114 has shaped their own communities and how they may be
115 innovators themselves,” the description continued. “This
116 exhibition will be an opportunity for community members to
117 come together in conversation around their community’s history,
118 present, and future with innovation.”

119 **Sparking discussion and** 120 **community**

121 Though the exhibit focuses to a degree on the history of
122 the communities it highlights, McBride said the exhibit “is not
123 about getting lost in the history” of a community, but to “spark
124 interest in the knowledge of what is happening now, what is still
125 happening and in the future. Invention, innovation and creativity
126 are not just lost in the past, they are still happening.”

127 In that spirit, he urged local people, businesses and
128 organizations to “call and invite others to the exhibit.”

129 “That’s now where our work begins for RAMP, the RFPL,
130 area historical societies, and area chambers of commerce,”
131 McBride said.

132 McBride said it will be interesting to see how each site
133 leverages the exhibit for community interaction and discussion.
134 He said that regional groups should take advantage of having
135 such an important exhibit in the community and see visiting the
136 exhibit as “a group activity.”

137 “This is a real opportunity for these organizations to
138 come here, see the exhibit, and to tell their own stories of
139 invention, innovation and creativity that is happening right now,”
140 he said.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

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141 Spark! will be on display upstairs at the Rockingham Free
142 Public Library, 65 Westminster St., Bellows Falls, through Sunday,
143 July 26, with special hours Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 5:30
144 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.; and Sunday, noon to 4 p.m. A
145 grand opening and open house takes place Saturday, June 27
146 from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. For more information, visit
147 [vermonthumanities.org/programs/attend/museum-on-main-](http://vermonthumanities.org/programs/attend/museum-on-main-street/spark)
148 [street/spark](http://vermonthumanities.org/programs/attend/museum-on-main-street/spark).

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