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## Co-Working Space Aims to Boost Downtown Bradford

By Kelly Burch, Valley News Correspondent  
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Bradford, Vt. — When Hill's 5&10 closed in 2015 after more than 60 years in business, it left another vacant storefront in downtown Bradford. Area businesspeople were worried about the changing face of downtown and what it meant for the town and the region.

"Last fall, every meeting I went to, people were saying, 'What are we going to do? Our streets are emptying out,'" recalled Monique Priestley, who is the secretary of the executive committee for the Cohase Chamber of Commerce and founder of Cohase Young Professionals.

As a young person deeply involved with the town, Priestley, 31, said she felt the need to be part of the solution. For years she had been thinking about a co-working space that would provide local freelancers, telecommuters and entrepreneurs with a place to work while also providing classes, meeting space and other resources for the community. Speaking with people in the region last fall, Priestley decided the time was right.

A year later, Priestley has moved forward with plans to open a co-working space, The Space on Main, in the former 5&10 store during the first quarter of 2018. The nonprofit will allow people to work with high-speed internet for the day or on a monthly basis, as well as give artists and others a place to teach classes and reach more people.

"Primarily I hope it's a resource that people can use and feel like they have what they need in the area to stay here," said Priestley, who lives in Bradford.

While co-working spaces might be a trendy luxury for city dwellers, they can be essential for people in rural communities to pursue career opportunities.

"We have a significant number of individuals and entrepreneurs who work from home or telecommute for employers outside of our region," Eric Volk, executive director of the Cohase Chamber of Commerce, said by

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email. “These folks face a number of challenges.”

In an area where high-speed internet is not universally available and cell service is unreliable, working from home can be difficult, if not impossible. Priestley said she hopes The Space on Main will provide the technological resources to enable people to keep working in the area. It’s a need she understands well, since she telecommutes to her job for a technology company based in Seattle.

“That’s the most common thing I’m running into,” she said. “People are just desperate for (reliable, high-speed internet). They’re telling me, ‘If this space doesn’t happen, we can’t live here anymore.’ ”

In addition, Priestley said, she hopes the space will provide resources for the greater Bradford community, especially young people. She has spoken with yoga instructors and artists about offering classes there, and plans to make conference space available for free to area nonprofit organizations.

“As a nonprofit, we want to have people working together, and also have programming for kids and people in the area because there’s not a lot going on,” Priestley said, noting that she took advantage of many community programs while growing up in the area. “I really value the community and the sense that you have to be invested in the betterment of your community.”

Last summer, Priestley registered The Space on Main as a nonprofit organization and formed a 10-member board of directors. Now she is focused on fundraising with a goal of \$100,000 to cover necessary renovations to the 7,000-square-foot space and operating costs for the first six months. However, she is planning to do whatever she can to get the space opened quickly.

“I’m hoping at the end of quarter one that there’s enough money to get into the space and commit to the lease, even if we’re not at the \$100,000,” she said.

Priestley estimates that, in the long term, The Space on Main will need about 25 monthly members to cover costs. She said she believes she has about that many people who will sign up when the space opens.

Sam Drazin, the vice president of The Space on Main board and executive director of Changing Perspectives, an education nonprofit based in Bradford, said Priestley’s drive and ability to network will make The Space on Main a success.

“Monique is determined,” he said by email. “Monique is also an amazing networker. ... Networking with individuals who can support The Space on Main is vital for both starting The Space on Main and its continued sustainability.”

Sarah Copeland Hanzas, owner of The Local Buzz cafe on Main Street in Bradford and representative to the Vermont Legislature, said she looks forward to the space opening.

“It’s an ideal complement to downtown Bradford because so many of our telecommuters and sole proprietors out in the surrounding hills need just a little something — a meeting space, high-speed internet, tools or equipment, client convenience — to enable them to live and work where they love to be,” she said by email. “It will be a great asset to our micro-businesses and telecommuters.”

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