

## 5 Questions for Patricia Sears

After a career spent community-building abroad, an economic development expert explains why she's investing in Newport, Vermont

by Melissa Stanton, [AARP Livable Communities](#), October 2014



Patricia Sears: "A key to success when working in any community is listening — listening and learning."  
— Courtesy photo

Although [Newport, Vt.](#), is the largest municipality in [Orleans County](#), it is a very small city. Its population is 4,700 according to the 2010 census. At one time Newport, which is located along [Lake Memphremagog](#) and sits just six miles south of the Canadian border, was a thriving commercial hub for logging, lumber mills, railroads, furniture factories and (during Prohibition) bootlegging.

Over time, however, the region's economic engines slowed and essentially stopped. Today, the community remains in one of the most remote regions of the state. While Newport has the highest second home ownership rate in Vermont, unemployment among the area's permanent residents is chronically [among the highest in the state](#). Nearly 41 percent of [Orleans County's population](#) is age 50 or older; two decades ago only 27 percent of its residents were 50-plus.

Patricia Sears has a vision for how Newport can thrive again. A Long Island, New York, native who worked out of Washington, D.C., as a community development specialist for remote areas of Asia and Africa, Sears and her husband, Steve Mason, a government relations consultant, relocated to his family's hometown of [Lowell](#), a community 20 miles west of Newport, in 2001.

Since then Sears has become one of the biggest champions of Vermont's "[Northeast Kingdom](#)," as the region housing the state's three northeast counties is known. After several years of advocating on behalf of Lowell, Sears was hired by the [Newport City Renaissance Corporation](#), a downtown organization accredited by the [National Main Street Center](#), a subsidiary of the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#). Sears has secured development grants for Newport and, working with local leaders, has led the city to install needed [wayfinding signage](#), adopt [form-based code zoning](#) and enter a [foreign trade zone partnership](#) that expects to bring high-tech jobs to the community.

In 2012, Sears was named Newport's Citizen of the Year. The following year she led Newport's efforts to join the [AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities](#). In July 2014 Sears was named president of [AARP Vermont](#), a volunteer position.

### **1. Most of your career was spent working on community and economic development issues overseas. How do those experiences relate to working in rural Vermont?**

A key to success when working in any community is listening — listening and learning. Another key is tenacity. People will tell you something can't be done because it was tried before and didn't work. You just need to keep going and building relationships and turning those relationships into partnerships and then leveraging those relationships and partnerships. Similarly, when you're looking at results it's not just

measuring what you *think* success is but measuring what success *really* is. When you do that, it's usually incredibly revealing and much more powerful than what we had thought up in our minds.

Also, looking at what a community *does* have helps it see what it *doesn't* have and that helps inform next steps. It's basically a way of reminding people who may be feeling "oh, poor me" to look at what they have. In Newport we have an international lake. We have access to farms, so we really can do a better job of eating healthier. We have a walking path that goes all the way up to the Canadian border. We have bodies of water we can use for kayaking or swimming or canoeing.

Once we recognize the things we have, we need to find ways to work with the recreation department as well as with businesses and other partnerships to enrich Newport as a destination for healthy, active living. Getting people to say, "we've got this," helps them work toward improving whatever it is and making it more relevant.



Lake Memphremagog and Newport, Vermont, as seen from St. Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Church. — TopShotsLLC

## **2. Why did Newport join the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities?**

Newport is committed to enhancing and expanding its age-friendly attributes. When the opportunity to join the [AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities](#) was presented and understood, businesses, educators, the city government, health and economic development agencies and members of the community joined together to advocate for participation.

Newport is a hub for the region's employment, services, shopping and dining. The county's hospital is close by, as is the boardwalk along the international Lake Memphremagog and a bike path that crosses the border into Canada.

However, Newport acknowledges the seriousness of having one of the oldest populations in Vermont and that we're a community with mobility challenges and a lack of jobs. We also know that while Newport may not be diverse in race, we are very diverse economically, culturally and socially. We know that economic development must be integrated with community development in order for success to be sustainable. We also know that age-friendly includes the whole lifecycle and what's going to work for our seniors or our 50-plus is certainly going to work for young parents who are trying to cross the street with a stroller.

Although downtown Newport is compact and walkable for shopping, dining, recreation and the arts, the street design can be improved to better accommodate crossing streets safely and provide multimodal transportation options. (There are actually efforts underway to improve winter mobility opportunities via snowshoes and cross-country skiing.) Vermont has a very old housing stock that needs to be rehabilitated and remodeled for 50-plus singles and couples as well as for the young professionals who can bring our neighborhoods vibrancy and diversity.

## **3. Newport is a largely rural community, yet you and other community leaders helped create a community garden program. Why would a place where people have their own yards need or want a community garden?**

Parts of Newport include food deserts where it is hard for some residents in the more challenging neighborhoods to get nutritious and affordable ingredients for meals. We conducted a neighborhood survey asking people what's important to them and what they see as needs. A community garden was a

priority development for the residents. To be honest, a community garden was not something I thought they would say.

This neighborhood was an area where seniors didn't feel safe walking around and getting off their porches. People with young children didn't feel safe letting their kids walk around the neighborhood. The playground was too far away to walk to. There was a lot of dog poop lying around.

The community garden we wound up creating is a private-public partnership. A landowner donated the land and bought playground equipment so little kids can play nearby while parents work in the garden. Older adults who grew up on farms are now talking to younger people about that experience and kids are seriously interested in the stories. While younger people do the manual labor, like the digging and weeding, older people grow the seeds in their homes over the winter and instruct the kids how to care for the plants.

A pride has developed in that neighborhood and the people are taking care of one another. The streets are cleaner. Residents now spend time outside and they're getting off of their porches and are talking to one another.

When some of the teenagers acted up and pulled plants out of the ground, the neighbors who were older said, "That's unacceptable. And to repay the damage you did you're going to give us more volunteer hours helping with the garden." The kids are developing a healthy connection to the community. It's been quite an attitude adjustment.

The community garden is providing intergenerational learning and social activities as well as producing more than enough food for the neighborhood. The garden has sold some vegetables and herbs to local downtown restaurants and contributed produce to nearby food shelves. Seeing the success, other people have come forward to say, "I've got a plot of land. Do you want to work on that one, too?"

The neighborhood has a good core of volunteers but they had almost overextended. Last year they had close to seven garden plots. Now they're holding at five so they can do the best job with them. And a large part of what they're doing is teaching other people to fish by essentially saying, "We'll work with you and show you how we do it. Then it's all yours, and call if you need help."



The boardwalk along the southern crescent of Lake Memphremagog in Newport, Vermont. — Justin Cash

#### **4. Improving Internet access to Newport and the surrounding areas has been a community priority. Why?**

As part of our economic development efforts we need better access to affordable high-speed Internet. In order to recruit people to come to Newport and encourage economic development partnerships, we need to have the kind of home-based access people from elsewhere are used to, such as in Stanford, Boston, or wherever they'll be coming from.

Similarly, if people who are buying second homes are coming for the Vermont lifestyle, they may be looking to slow down but not necessarily check out. Being able to work from home or be in a maker-space once or twice a week is important. Good Internet access is essential to start-ups and businesses. We're also looking to be multi-generational. Older people can be a good resource for younger people, and

vice versa. Also, part of our story for younger people is that we're only six miles south of the border, we are 90 minutes from downtown Montreal, and you can be in Boston in three-and-half hours because we're right off the interstate.

### **5. What can community leaders and residents of other towns and cities learn from Newport's efforts and successes thus far?**

Age-friendly awareness has not only benefitted Newport, it has become an asset for advancing positive change. Other communities can look at Newport and learn the power of community investment and participation.

For instance, AARP gave out four community grants in Newport and the community garden received one of those grants to build more raised planting beds, which are easier for older adults to access. Small grants are incredibly important to making a difference and showing an investment in local solutions.

Our Community Commons program, a monthly meeting in downtown Newport, is recognized as a catalyst for awareness and participation. Supported by [Newport Community Justice Center](#), the Community Commons provides a way for community residents to be heard, to work through issues and to feel less isolated. The meeting gives residents a voice in developing age-friendly improvements that advance positive change in neighborhoods and the community-at-large.

And, perhaps most importantly, over the course of the next few years, Newport will undergo rapid economic development due to a \$200 million investment resulting from the federal government's [EB-5 Immigrant Investor Visa program](#). This program provides green cards for the families of investors who contribute \$500,000 or more to an economic development project. The projects coming to Newport include a biotech firm that's expected to provide 500 jobs, a \$20 million expansion of the Newport airport and the redevelopment of a city block that will feature short- and long-term suites for visitors, as well as restaurants and shops.

For so many years Newport has been the last in the state in just about everything. But about 10 years ago we basically said, "Okay, that's a wrap. Now we are going to be first." Everyone was like, "Yeah, sure." But we became the first community in Vermont to have the [American Institute of Architects](#) come in with an urban design assistance team.

That helped us attract other experts who have encouraged us to pursue an assets-based approach to development. They gave us examples of doable improvements so we could pursue some quick wins, such as posting signage around town and establishing [mixed-use form-based code zoning](#) rather than conventional, more segregated use-based zoning. With form-based code a developer can't come in and just drop a big box store on us. (By the way, Newport is the first and, at this point, only community in the state to be using form-base code.)

Today, people come to Newport and say, "Wow, this place rocks!"

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