

TRANSCRIPT:

A Colchester mobile home park rallied to become a village. One year later, they're practicing patience and resilience

December 16, 2024 | Olivia Conti for the Community News Service and Vermont Public

Host intro: It's been a little more than one year since the Westbury Mobile Home Park in Colchester became the *Village* of Westbury – the first *new* village established in Vermont in nearly a century.

For Vermont Public, Olivia Conti [CON-tee] of the Community News Service talked with Westbury residents about *why* this community rallied to become a village, and what they've *learned* in their first year.

Host outro: This story was produced in partnership with Community News Service, a University of Vermont journalism internship.

Gayle Pezzo (active tape): *“So this is the, like if you’re coming in on Coventry, this is the whole left side of the park, I don’t know, North, East, West and South...”*

Olivia Conti: I’m in the car with Gayle Pezzo, one of the 500 residents of the Village of Westbury. She’s giving me a tour.

Pezzo (active tape): *“This is the only road that everybody gets lost on.”*

Westbury is a sprawling, quiet community with 250 mobile homes on the east edge of Colchester.

Pezzo (active tape): *“Look! Turkeys! Oh you’re gonna see plenty of wildlife.”*

Residents say they love Westbury’s abundance of wildlife, trees, and quiet.

Conti (active tape): *Are they wild turkeys?*

Pezzo (active tape): *“They are! That’s what’s so awesome about this place...”*

Marc Juneau is a teacher who has lived in Westbury for eight years. He says he fell in love with Westbury the day his real estate agent brought him there.

Marc Juneau: “When I got out of the car to see the unit on Webley Street, it was just a little slice of heaven. You feel like you’re at a campground, but you’re in the heart of Chittenden county.”

But a few years ago, Westbury residents almost lost their “little slice of heaven.”

The park’s owner put the land up for sale, and, Pezzo says, there were developers in line to buy it.

Pezzo: “We were all afraid of losing our homes.”

So the residents started organizing.

Marc Juneau says,

Juneau: “There was an immediate, grassroots effort to see if we can’t save this somehow.”

And it worked.

In 2019, Westbury residents came together, formed a housing co-op, took out a loan, and bought the property themselves.

But buying the park came with new challenges.

The co-op was now responsible for the park’s maintenance and infrastructure needs, like water, electricity, roads and snow plowing.

Because working-class Westbury is technically a private community, getting those services was complicated – and expensive.

Pezzo: “I just felt like, well, there’s got to be a solution.”

Pezzo and her neighbors started researching.

They found that Westbury might be able to get better rates on utilities if they became a public municipality – a *village* – in addition to being a co-op.

Once again, Westbury residents rallied to take control of their future.

Conti (on tape): “Did you like initially start talking to people...?”

Pezzo: “Door knocking.”

Conti (on tape): "Door knocking."

Pezzo: "That's exactly what you had to do is you knocked on every door."

It wasn't easy.

Westbury didn't have money for lawyers or professional support for guidance.

And the Town of Colchester was skeptical about Westbury's plans, for several reasons. They said they didn't think becoming a village would actually help Westbury financially.

Pezzo (Colchester Selectboard meeting recording): "We're here tonight to present to you a petition."

Still, last year, the majority of Westbury's registered voters signed petitions to become an incorporated village of Colechester.

Pezzo (Colchester Selectboard meeting recording): "...Village of Westbury."

Pezzo presented the stack of more than 200 petitions at a Colchester selectboard meeting, wrapped in a turquoise ribbon.

Pezzo (Colchester Selectboard meeting recording): "We are available to respond..."

The Colchester Selectboard wished the residents goodwill in their endeavor.

(Colchester Selectboard meeting recording): "Thank you Gayle." [Applause]

And a month later, they were official.

Residents of the new village of Westbury are still also residents of Colchester. They pay taxes and vote in Colchester, and use services like Colchester fire and police.

The Westbury Village Board of Trustees and the Westbury co-op work in tandem to manage the park.

A year into life as a Village, many Westbury residents say they haven't seen big changes.

Harris Quesnel is a Westbury resident and Village Board member. He says they're still working on getting the municipal utility rates they've wanted since the beginning.

Harris Quesnel: "So that's the problem we're having right now, is being on par with all the other villages. We're trying to get the same equity."

On December 17th at noon, the Westbury Village Board is on the agenda at a Champlain Water District board meeting. They plan to ask for the same wholesale rate that other municipalities get.

Pezzo says, while this work can be challenging and slow-moving, it's worth it. It's all about fairness, equity, and resilience – getting out and trying things to protect affordable housing.

Pezzo: “We’re not looking for handouts. We’re looking for having control of our own lives, and having the best possible place to live with integrity and pride.”

The Westbury Village Board says they welcome more participation and input from Westbury residents as they enter their second year as a village.

For Vermont Public and the Community News Service, I'm Olivia Conti.