

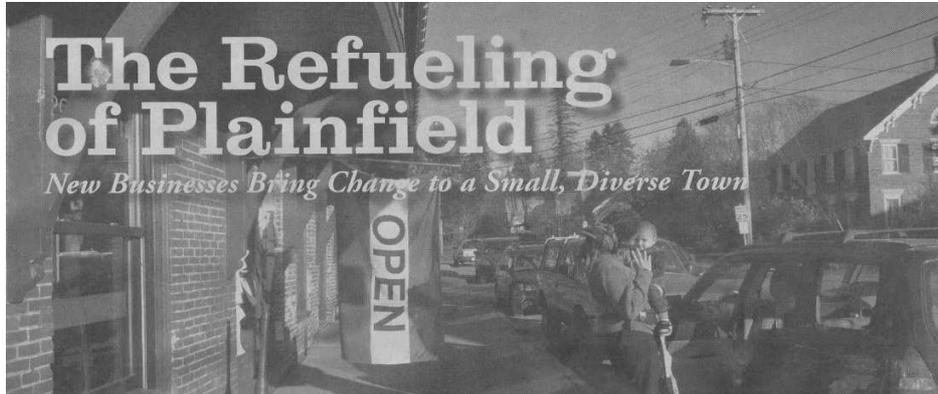
Published in

The Bridge

FREE, INDEPENDENT & LOCAL

Montpelier, Vermont

(Main article, sidebar and a later follow-up piece are merged.)



A spate of new business owners and improvements bring change to this small, socially diverse town, while maneuvers by convenience store chain owner and gasoline wholesaler/retailer Skip Vallee thwart friendly competition. His actions in Plainfield also bring to the fore Vallee's legal and political tactics elsewhere.

By Ricka McNaughton (Nov. 7, 2013)

Ask someone nearby to describe this historic, quaint, livably-rural New England town, population around 1300, and hands down, one word will top the list of adjectives for Plainfield. Quirky.

It might be better described as a place where the oft-opposing values of fierce individualism and a view to the common good actually work pretty well together, allowing for cantankerous spells. Plainfield has had a lot of practice seeking to reconcile the oft-polarized preferences of its citizenry.

Over several generations, a formidable process of assimilation has remolded the town character. In the late 1960's and early 70's, Plainfield, which historically had been studded with family farms and the businesses relating to a rural community's needs, became a magnet for invading counter-culture throngs. Some came to attend ultra-progressive Goddard College, now converted to low-residency programs only. Others were lured by the prospect of back-to-the-land lifestyles. As small farms dwindled, the town saw growth as a bedroom community. Montpelier, the state Capitol, is a 15-minute drive on a good day. Bad days have more to do with winter weather than traffic.

By some measures, Plainfield today is not much higher on the socio-demographic Quirk-O-Meter than many towns in Vermont. It still has its Age-of-Aquarius-holdovers and a visible new crop of dreadlocked young people. But there is also a significant conservative base. And, daughters and sons of invading liberals and bedrock local families have intermarried and produced hybrid offspring with sturdy, twin-world views. The make-up of the business sector is likewise mixed.

Plainfield also has an outsized number of entrepreneurs, artists, craftspersons and sought-after tradespeople working from home or shops strewn about the back roads and hills. Writers and musicians abound. The town is swimming in culture and know-how both traditional and new. Local small scale

food production has re-proliferated, sustained by an appreciation of its benefits and an abundance of localvore passion. The visible commercial district is tiny. It's arrayed along both U.S. Route 2 and the more classic village center, accessed by a steep, downhill turn off the highway and across the Winooski River that meanders through town. Any changes in the commercial sector generally set the populace abuzz.

One subject of buzz has been Peter Young, a 30-plus citizen of Plainfield. "I am particularly interested," he said, "in encouraging the development of a culture of green entrepreneurship in Plainfield and Central Vermont, what I refer to as the Plainfield Renaissance." A little more than a year ago, a vacated convenience store/gas pump combo property – known as "The Red Store -- came up for auction. It sits on well-traversed Route 2 and had long been part of the fabric of the local community, but the last owner ran into financial difficulties. Young was front and center for the bidding, along with his Renaissance dreams. He was outbid by regional gasoline/convenience store magnate R.L. "Skip" Vallee, a Shelburne resident.

Vallee, it seemed, had both the will and the financial means to block all other hopefuls. He had recently purchased and has now mostly completed a shiny new renovation of the only other such property for several miles, the former Tim's Convenience Store at the east border of town. The previous long-time owners were locals ready to bow out. Then, Vallee furthered his business plan for Plainfield by promptly offering the Red Store property, for which he had ponied up \$405,000, for resale at what seemed to many at the time a more reasonable market price of \$299. But it came with a non-compete deed restriction. It could not be used for gas sales or a convenience store operation. Some residents were taken aback by the heavy-handed suppression of local diversity and competition. Others don't much care and don't think the village can really support two convenience stores anymore. Times have changed. (Following this article see sidebar, *Who is Skip Vallee?*)

In the year since, the Red Store has not sold. Vallee said he may rent. "I just had my New York architect up and he took detailed measurements...we are considering a mixed use formulation, perhaps to include a laundromat, more residential...some gallery space," Vallee reported.

Vallee's renovation of "Tim's" which he christened Maplefield's at Twinfield, is a model of sparkling roadside convenience in a fairly tasteful, Anywhere, USA mold. He's taken obvious pains with the details and utilization of existing infrastructure. There's an airy, well-scrubbed feel, a bank of tables near sunny windows where people comfortably congregate, good coffee offerings and an eye-popping countertop featuring sugary baked goods, proffered on fancy platters with gleaming glass-domed covers. Vallee relocated the gas pumps from the front to the side of the building to significantly improve traffic flow and parking. Many appreciate the new set-up. Business is brisk. It pretty much always was.



Disappointed to lose the opportunity to reinvigorate the former Red Store space, Young eventually worked out a deal to purchase a former garage/auto repair business next door to it. He then installed entrepreneur Jim Malloy, owner of Black Bear Biodiesel (center left). Young is the landlord, although, as he clarified, "...sometimes I refer to Black Bear Biodiesel as 'our' business, and

in many ways Jim and I work like partners, but I'm not one of the shareholders."

Jim Malloy described his operation. "The first phase," he said, "is a recycled vegetable oil processing facility used as the feedstock for Biodiesel production, and secondly we'll offer biodiesel distribution for the public (coming in April.)" Over six months, Malloy partnered with nearly 85 restaurants to collect their used kitchen grease.

To some, Black Bear Biodiesel's arrival satisfyingly rebalances the town a little. Big oil at one end, used french fry oil at the other.

Biodiesel is an efficient substitute for diesel and #2 heating oil created from an array of sources including soy, algae, rendered animal fats and in Black Bear Biodiesel's case, recycled waste vegetable from restaurants. Young and Malloy also plan to host a rotation of outdoor food vendors April through October, including Noah Hahn (a musician and Montpelier's Langdon Street Café co-founder) with a coffee/espresso cart, Pete Coleman of Salumi Sausages, Mad Taco, Mo's BBQ and Ariel Zevon.

Zevon is best known locally for spearheading a terrifically well-intended community agriculture co-op storefront enterprise known as L.A.C. E., in nearby Barre, Vermont. Despite her vision and public-spirited approach, the operation proved unwieldy and the business ultimately folded. (In speaking of her, locals like to supply a footnote concerning Ariel's family ties. She is the daughter of the late musician Warren Zevon and god-daughter of Jackson Browne, who blew into Barre on occasion to do concert fundraisers for L.A.C.E.)

A few existing Plainfield eateries also have seen change. Last year the tiny Hestia Espresso Bar quietly slipped into the former Dancing Goat Café space, tucked away where locals in need of caffeine know where to find it. A new addition: artisan ice cream. Across Rt. 2 from the new Maplefields, beloved restaurateurs Janet and Dudley Askew (right) had seasonally operated the homey Maple Valley Café and Gift Shop for decades.

They recently sold the business to Amanda and Jason Thompson, a native Vermont couple from nearby Woodbury.



Amanda (shown left) is the hands-on operator, with Jessica Conley as her baking and kitchen assistant.



The Thompsons deeply appreciate the legacy of the former owners and plan to continue things much as they are, but will be open year round – a big change. Amanda advised, "I'd love to offer an expanded to-go cooler, and eventually have a 100% [from] scratch kitchen. And I'd like to thank everyone in town for being so welcoming to us."

Another restaurant, Positive Pie in the lower village (now thrice-cloned elsewhere in the region), has just completed an upgrade of the pizza side of the operation. It sits adjacent to the acclaimed, larger light dining area offering a highly creative/comfy menu fusion that taps locally sourced ingredients and offers a full bar serving unique craft brews. It's both a local hangout and a destination eatery.

Some five years ago Plainfield was the smallest town in Vermont to receive a Creative Community designation through the Vermont Council on Rural development, and promptly set about sculpting its economic values and future. A few among many outgrowths include: new pedestrian friendly sidewalks and landscaping, an information kiosk and mini-park, and new period-style, energy efficient streetlamps along a previously dim walkway. The all-volunteer fire department recently celebrated its 100th birthday with the erection of a handsome granite commemorative marker.

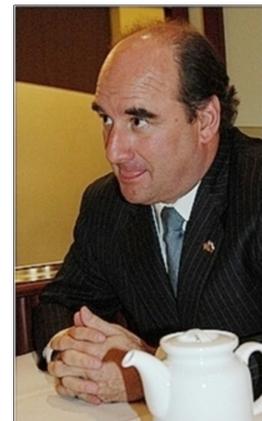
Selectperson David Strong has spearheaded a staged restoration of the historic but ailing Town Hall Building destined for multiple public uses, including a performing arts center. He reflected that “the restored global lighting on the bridge – making something old new again – is symbolic of the spirit of the changes in Plainfield.” Selectperson Alice Merrill noted, “We’re blessed to have such hard-working volunteers responsible for these [many] projects.”

Ideologies may be quirkily all over the map in Plainfield. But they are part of the fuel that, artfully blended, moves Plainfield forward. □

SIDEBAR:

Who is Skip Vallee?

A BIO BLIP: *Rodolphe (a.k.a.Skip) Vallee founded R. L. Vallee, Inc., a growing chain of convenience stores and gasoline sales sites in New England since 1989. He serves as Chairman, CEO and owner. He was U.S.Ambassador to the Slovak Republic from 2005 to 2007, and has served as a major Republican fundraiser. He holds a BA in Biology and an MBA from The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He previously served as Vice President of the Catalyst Waste-to-Energy Corporation and has been with Vallee Petroleum Inc., St. Albans, VT, since 1992. (The uncredited photo at right was borrowed from [Freyne Land](#), a Seven Days political blog by the late Peter Freyne.)*



BACKGROUND FOR CONTEXT: Mr. Vallee recently purchased two convenience store/gas properties in Plainfield, Vermont, renovating one of them and offering the other property for sale building with a non-compete clause attached to the deed. Vallee’s company Maplefields owns 38 stores/gas stations and 5 in development, with a number in Chittenden County. He made headlines this past year for his efforts (along with other area gasoline sellers) to block COSTCO’s plan to build self-serve pumps at its Colchester warehouse, citing traffic congestion issues and danger to nearby wetlands. Last January the District Environmental Commission granted COSTCO a state Act 250 land use permit to begin selling gasoline in Colchester. Another critical environmental ruling has since been issued.

U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) supported COSTCO’s plan to bring competition to the regional gasoline market where prices struck some, including Sanders, as artificially high. Sanders had earlier called for a

federal investigation into unusually high gasoline prices in the greater Burlington area where Vallee has a significant amount of business. He is both a retailer and a wholesaler.

Vallee contends that he sells his own gasoline in compliance with environmental regulations, and that the COSTCO project doesn't similarly comply. He launched a recent TV ad [see [YouTube video](#)] slamming Sanders for siding with COSTCO, characterizing the proposal and Sanders' support of it as a threat to Vermont's environment.

Ricka McNaughton conducted the following interview with Mr. Vallee (via e-mail, per his choice), noting that some questions are edited very slightly for brevity. McNaughton notes that this is not intended as a journalistically complete treatment of the issues. The interview is solely a dialogue with Mr. Vallee, whom few in Plainfield know personally, to illuminate Mr. Vallee's background and allow him to account for some of his positions. □

INTERVIEW:

RM: (Ricka McNaughton) The new Maplefields looks pretty spiffy. What improvements are you especially pleased with? Any lingering construction issues to deal with?

RLV: (Rodolphe L. "Skip" Vallee) Designated parking, more rational car movement for the gasoline, and bathrooms one would be proud to show one's mother in law. [There are some] Small punch list items we hope to finish before the snow flies.

RM: As you know, some Plainfielders had strong reactions to the non-compete restrictions you placed on the Red Store property, while some feel that there are other *[just as useful]* ways the old convenience store space can benefit Plainfield. Many perceive you only as a man wholly unconflicted about exercising hard-nosed business practices in other people's towns, in the pursuit of personal profit, or someone who's taken blunt-force political swings at Sen. Bernie Sanders in the media for siding with COSTCO on their bid to sell gas in Colchester – in direct competition with pumps you own in the area. You wield a new kind of power over Plainfield's tiny business sector in ways that impact the social fabric of the town. Is there another side of Skip Vallee you'd like people to know about?

RLV: A tad off base.

[Interviewer's note: Mr. Vallee was invited to expound on his answer to this question but opted to let it be.)

RM: When you complete a new store development, how do you feel? Is it just another notch in your business belt, or do you enjoy getting involved in the engineering issues, the aesthetic details, the challenges of the site?

RLV: The pride is in seeing the reactions of our customers to what we have done. Actually, you have a good insight---besides the glow of a great customer reaction, I like the creative design and zoning interpretation process that allows us to do things that others had not thought possible or were unable to envision.

RM: Do you have family in Vermont? How do you give to your own community? How do you count

your successes in life?

RLV: My entire family is in Vermont, mostly in Franklin County, where I grew up hunting and playing sports. I live in Shelburne now, and our biggest contribution locally, if that is your question, is my wife's role as a Shelburne Museum board member. My largest statewide contribution was nearly a decade of political work, striving to make Vermont a better place. Success for me will be measured in what I have taught my children.

RM: I noted a while back, from stories in the media, that you hoped you might turn the Red Store space into a positive for Plainfield. How's that going?

RLV: Frustrating. I was very interested in looking for a way to make the store a place for the seniors center, but safety and other issues, not easily solved in an old building, make that almost impossible.

RM: Regarding the COSTCO appeal, it's an easy matter for some in the media to scoff at the environmental claims of a person with [impacted] business and political interests such as yours. Your recent video also feeds the perception around Plainfield that you are mainly out to protect your business turf, and not incidentally delighted to ally Bernie Sanders with Big Business, for its sheer political currency. You're also a man with some environmental bona fides. Briefly, is there anything you'd care to add to the broad stroke reasoning you've offered in the media, to further shore up your environmental stance on why COSTCO should not be permitted to sell gasoline in Colchester?

RLV: You would be the first reporter, other than a small quicky on WCAX, to report that the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources has now ruled a significant portion of the Costco site a Class II wetland. Costco is seeking a waiver from the setbacks required from that wetland. I know of few ever given. You might ask Bernie if he thinks that decades of settled Vermont wetlands buffer precedent should be set aside for his corporate crony.

[Interviewer's note: According to WCAX-TV, COSTCO's attorney said they will not dispute the wetland classification ruling but will work with regulators to address it.]

RM: To those on the outside, gas pricing is a dastardly complex and suspicious global business. As a regional wholesaler, what practical power do you have to make prices more affordable in this region? Could you consider using your market strength to benefit Vermont consumers, in the same manner COSTCO and Sen. Sanders want to do? Isn't that a better way to corner the market?

RLV: The most practical way to make regional prices more affordable is to facilitate getting western crude to eastern refineries. That's [worth] about 20 cents a gallon, based on today's spreads. The Portland Pipeline Reversal would be a good start. Ask Bernie if he is for that. We are competitive in every market we are in. The sheer number of customers that come to our stores, for whatever reason, and oftentimes price, shows that Vermont consumers vote for their benefit with their feet...or at least their wheels.

[Interviewer's (Nov. 7, 2013) note: Just a few weeks ago the Portland (Maine) Pipe Line Corp. announced their decision to surrender a permit to reverse the flow of its 236-mile underground pipeline and bring in controversial tar sands oil from Canada to South Portland's waterfront. Portland's CEO

issued a statement characterizing the move as a “good faith commitment” that they don’t have a pending or imminent ‘tar sands’ project. They still have the option to reapply.] □

The Bridge FREE, INDEPENDENT & LOCAL Montpelier, Vermont

An 11th Hour Show Stopper:

Gasoline Wholesaler/Retailer Skip Vallee Appeals Black Bear Biodiesel’s Permit

by Ricka McNaughton (Dec. 12, 2013)

In the tiny close-knit business community of tiny Plainfield, Vermont, where friendly competition goes without much saying, a permit dispute has arisen between two recent arrivals. The business owners involved have markedly different ideologies concerning free enterprise, and one of them has now prevented the other from opening his doors, at least temporarily.

Entrepreneur Jim Malloy plans to convert waste cooking oil from area restaurants into a biodiesel product that can fuel vehicles as well as heat homes and businesses. At Black Bear Biodiesel, his shop on Route 2, Malloy wants to collect and process waste oil, sell fuel and seasonally host a small rotation of outdoor food carts. Plainfield resident Peter Young owns the building, not the business, but has a collegial interest in his tenant’s success. Malloy had been all set for his grand opening in early November until someone brought him up short. That someone was R.L. “Skip” Vallee, CEO of R.L. Vallee, Inc., owner of the Maplefields chain of 38 convenience stores/gas stations in Vermont, New York and New Hampshire. And now Plainfield.

Last month Vallee filed an appeal of Black Bear’s permit with the Environmental Division of Vermont’s Superior Court, alleging that it wasn’t issued in accord with the “policies, purposes, or terms of the plan or bylaws of the Town of Plainfield.” This effectively blocks Black Bear from doing business until the appeal resolves. It’s not the first business hardball Vallee’s thrown.

Vallee’s company recently purchased and undertook a costly renovation, completed last month, of the former Tim’s Convenience store and gas pumps – now rechristened Maplefields. It’s a gleaming, impressively designed expansion that takes creative advantage of the existing site. The store has always done a brisk through-traffic business on busy U.S. Route 2, and many locals depend on and appreciate the very convenience it was designed to offer. Maplefields is a half mile from the building Black Bear Diesel now occupies. After buying Tim’s, Vallee purchased at auction a foreclosed Plainfield food and gas business called The Red Store, the only other such place in town.

Young had also hoped to buy and reinvigorate the Red Store, once a community hub, but Vallee outbid all comers. Then, Vallee promptly relisted the Red Store for sale with a non-compete clause hooked to the deed. It could no longer be a convenience store, or sell gasoline or groceries. In the year since, the Red Store has stood vacant and unsold.

Young subsequently bought the property that now houses Black Bear Biodiesel. It sits just a french fry's throw from Valley's Red Store and shares a continuous blacktop. For years, under various former owners, the two properties have had an accommodating, reciprocal right of way arrangement. Vallee has proved less accommodating.

Malloy said that a letter he received from Vallee's attorney last July claimed that Black Bear's proposed food carts and fuel pumps were located in "the reserved circulation and parking area." Peter Young phoned Vallee to try work things out amicably, but Vallee opposed their wishes. "We acquiesced [to a disappointing compromise]" said Malloy, "because the fledgling business just needs to open its doors and start selling some biodiesel." All appeared settled, until now.

Vallee seems drawn to roles involving competitive strategy. In addition to growing Maplefields, Vallee serves as a high level Republican loyalist, having been variously a prospective candidate, campaign manager and presidential appointee. Last spring when international "buying club" giant COSTCO received an Act 250 permit to offer self-serve pumps at its Colchester, Vermont warehouse, bringing the threat of lower-priced gas to his market area, Vallee and a few other dealers appealed, citing traffic issues and the danger posed by gasoline pumps to nearby wetlands. Vallee is both a wholesaler and a retailer.

Having a personal profit motive does not preclude someone from having a persuasive environmental point. The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources subsequently ruled a significant portion of the COSTCO site a Class II wetland. It's not certain yet whether the ruling will sink COSTCO's plans. It certainly bogged things down.

In 2012, Vermont's independent U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders called upon the Federal Trade Commission to determine if some gasoline dealers in Chittenden County were colluding to keep prices high in that region. That's one of Vallee's significant market areas. When Sanders later backed COSTCO's plan to sell cheaper gas, Vallee launched an attack video positioning the widely-perceived champion of "the little guy" as a big business corporate crony and looming danger to Vermont's environment.

What economic threat, Plainfield onlookers wonder, could Vallee perceive from a small, start-up company looking to repurpose and sell used restaurant grease? When asked about the impetus for his appeal, Vallee reported via email exchanges, "Our issues with our neighbor on biodiesel are settled. We had asked the town to make clear this [permit] was for biodiesel only since no evidence was presented relating to factors for other uses." In a clarification he added, "I don't believe [Black Bear's] final application had any food vendor use proposal."

An application document obtained from the Environmental Court makes clear reference to the food trucks. According to Janice Walrafen, Chair of the Plainfield Development Review Board, "The food carts were noted and discussed throughout the application process. But because they are seasonal...less than 6 months a year...we did not feel they required a conditional use permit."

Vallee's appeal of Black Bear Biodiesel's permit is set for a status conference in the Environmental Division of Superior Court in January. At a special meeting held on December 4th, Plainfield's Select Board decided that the Town of Plainfield will make an appearance. □

Freelance feature writer Ricka McNaughton, though technically a Marshfield resident, lives within walking distance of Plainfield village. She previously worked in non-profit communication and spokesperson roles, consumer education and government-media relations in Montpelier. [TIS web version of the article contains minor text additions/changes from the original print edition for clarity, and a few photos that did not originally appear in The Bridge.]