

NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES PROJECT

A FIVE YEARS LATER ASSESSMENT

January, 2002

“The Ford Foundation-funded project forced communities to look at themselves and awaken the need to reinvent and reinvigorate themselves.” (Steve Knox)

People in these primarily rural northern New England towns and (a few) cities have worked hard to build new understandings and new practices aimed at valuing their natural resources, landscapes, heritage, and rural quality of life. They are confronting traditional outlooks, economic forces beyond their control, and political power in the hands of old-timers reluctant to change. This fourth assessment is dedicated to those valiant pioneers.

For:
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NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES PROJECT A FIVE YEARS LATER ASSESSMENT

Executive Summary

An unusual partnership linking the Ford Foundation, the three statewide community foundations in New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont, and six “chosen” communities officially ended approximately five years ago. This assessment responds to the basic question, How much have the communities changed since the project began in 1993?

The basic findings and conclusions are:

1. A natural-resources based economy makes sense for these rural communities in northern New England given their forests, ocean fronts, lakes, farmlands, and mountains – and their small populations, large land areas, and perceived scenic beauty. Yet, the challenges are enormous in creating profitable businesses that provide well-paying jobs for local residents that also do not harm the environment and respect people’s quality of life.
2. Communities go through cycles of ups and downs, just the way people do. It can be disheartening to be in a down mode, but experience from these communities indicates that persistence, hard work, focus on the vision, identifying and building on community assets and needs, and even time breaks that cycle. The answer is definitely not to chase after outside dollars or to impose solutions on communities.
3. Geographical isolation, loss or severe downsizing of a community’s major employer, resistance to change, inadequate institutions and infrastructure to compete in today’s global economy, and the recent economic recession are hurdles that these people face. Their rugged individualism, independence, and resilience allows the most isolated and/or poorer people to be primarily unaffected by economic cycles and others, who embrace change, to act and succeed.
4. Effective rural community leaders are not those defined by traditional qualities. Rather, they are people who are given recognition and stature by others because they are trusted, respected, caring, supportive, and helpful.
5. The extent of understanding and progress towards implementing such a vague and illusive concept as “sustainable community” depends on timing, circumstances, perceptions, and language.

6. To a person, all of the active participant community leaders and some of the most dedicated volunteers describe how much they have personally changed and grown through their involvement in the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project.

7. The bottom-line is that many of the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project participants feel grateful for the support they received from the Ford Foundation and the three community foundations and abandoned once the project officially ended in 1997. Others feel that the time and resource commitment was sufficient to seed projects and also not create a dependency on outside funders.

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Background

An unusual partnership linking the Ford Foundation, the three statewide community foundations in New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont, and six “chosen” communities officially ended approximately five years ago. This assessment responds to the basic question, How much have the communities changed since the project began in 1993?

In asking and publicizing answers to this question, Tom Deans, Vice President of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation continues the practical learning from the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project. Three previous assessments were conducted and lessons learned are described through community stories, community progress charts, and analyses.¹

The Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project was designed in early 1993 as an experiment in learning. While many people in the United States in the early 1990’s were engaged in conflicts over jobs versus the environment, this project was launched with the intent to explore “new ways to balance economic development and revitalization with the need for environmental and natural resources protection”². The Ford Foundation, through its environment and development program, recognized that “real solutions to environmental problems had to be developed in the communities grappling with these conflicts”.³

The two earliest assessments captured immediate findings about how people struggled with understanding and applying an approach that emphasizes the assets of a natural resources-based economy and the distinctive character, identity, and quality of life of rural northern New England communities and regions.

Several key conclusions were presented:

¹ “Northern New England Sustainable Communities Implementation Project: An Evaluation (January, 1996), “Northern New England Sustainable Communities Implement Project: Lessons Learned (November, 1997), and “One Year Later Assessment (1999). All three reports, by Elizabeth Kline, are available from the NH Charitable Foundation in Concord, NH (Telephone: 603/225-6641 extension 252; email: sam@nhcf.org or www.nhcf.org).

² “The Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project: A Review” was prepared by Janet Maughan in January, 1998, p. 1.

³ Maughan report, p. 2.

1. *Capacity building* is the foundation for achieving constructive community results. Quantifiable and qualitative accomplishments, such as reducing poverty, creating local wealth, and restoring degraded forests and wetlands, are tied directly to individuals' and communities' ability to develop trusting relationships, nurture leaders, and establish effective organizations.⁴
2. Although no sustainable community project reaches a definitive endpoint, each of the six communities studied provides evidence of progress towards this goal. The most tangible accomplishments come from communities where people define clear directions, build capacities, and produce incremental project results designed as stepping stones for future initiatives.⁵
3. Communities have different entry points for galvanizing attention, support, and actions. Economic development is the top priority of all six communities, although its definition evolved over the four years to interconnect with environmental and social/quality of life concerns. Jobs, businesses, and tax revenues are still driving forces in community decisions, but practitioners in these six community projects emphasize the importance of encouraging development which builds on the community's assets – its people, historic character, traditions, environmental resources and landscapes, and rural quality of life.⁶
4. After four years, more people (especially practitioners directly involved in the sustainable community projects) understand the meaning of “sustainability”. Practicing “sustainability” has improved communications, led to a more cooperative spirit, and developed a greater sense of shared problems and responsibilities.⁷

The third assessment provided some hindsight analysis based on a retrospective look a year after the project officially concluded in 1997. All previous findings were confirmed, with the added caveat that “There is no quick fix and, at times, it seems as if change comes in cycles rather than continuous progress”.⁸

This fourth assessment is designed to probe more deeply to discover what worked and didn't work. Rather than reporting and analyzing results, the interviews for this assessment focused on finding out, from the community practitioners' perspective, how much change has really taken place.

- Have the principles and concepts of sustainability been embedded in community decisions and actions? If so, how? If not, why not?

⁴ “Lessons Learned” (November 1997), p. 2.

⁵ Ibid, p. 2.

⁶ Ibid, p. 9.

⁷ Ibid, p. 15.

⁸ “One Year Later Assessment” (1999), p. 12.

- Has economic development reverted to traditional definitions or expanded to link with environmental, social, cultural, historic, transportation, information technology, public health, and other community concerns? How has the concept of desired economic development been affected by the economic up and down cycles?
- Have new leaders really replaced the old guard? Who are these new and emerging leaders? How can they be discovered?
- How have the active sustainable community project participants grown or changed over time?
- Have the organizations been able to survive without the prestige, personal support, and financial grants of the Ford Foundation and the statewide community foundations? What happened during the transition phase after the official close-out of the project by the foundations?

The audience for this and the previous assessments are the community practitioners themselves; other community participants involved in sustainable community or healthy community or livable community or community-based development type projects; researchers, educators, and students; consultants; government bureaucrats at the local, state, regional, and national scales; and foundation staff and board members.

The value of this Northern New England Sustainable Communities Program assessment is enhanced by being a long-term, continuous study of the same six communities. Most case studies or community stories reflect a moment in time and hindsight understandings; they do not capture changes as they unfold nor do they often re-visit the sites over time.

Moreover, the willingness of community participants to share information, provide helpful insights, and reflect critically on circumstances is due, in part, to the level of trust developed over time between them and the researcher. It is unusual for the same person to be contracted to do four assessments over an almost nine year time period. Tom Deans, project manager, deserves full credit for allocating funds for each assessment and seeking the benefits of accumulated knowledge in this manner.

Each of the three community foundations chose two projects within their states based on their values, interests, contacts, and experiences. Their identity and boundaries have shifted over the nine years.

Initially, in 1993, there was a municipality (and specifically the downtown of Hardwick, Vermont); four geographical regions (Greater Farmington, Maine; Concord, Vermont; Mt. Washington Valley, New Hampshire which includes Conway and North Conway; and the STA-NORTH area of N.H. which includes Groveton/Northumberland, Stark, and Stratford); and an ecosystem (Cobscook Bay, Maine).

Now, these communities are defined as the Greater Hardwick region; the western mountains of Maine (an ecosystem that includes the Greater Farmington region); South Essex County of Vermont (a region that encompasses Concord, Vermont); the Mt. Washington Valley region (as its own identity that is more than the Conway-North Conway corridor); the Cobscook Bay region (that is defined as much by the links among the communities as it is by the Bay connecting them); and by a non-clear identity (STANORTH has not emerged as its own region but has remained as three, distinct towns sharing a few public responsibilities).

More detailed community stories can be found in the January 1996 assessment report. A comparison of progress can be viewed in the November 1997 report by looking at the time charts from mid 1993 when the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project began, and mid 1997 when the four-year assessment was completed. Community updates were included in the last assessment completed in April 1999.

What follows is a brief synopsis of each of the six communities followed by a critical analysis with examples from the communities. Each community snapshot reflects some past history and the current status of how each is working towards linking their environmental, economic development, and social/community concerns and actions.

Community Snapshots

COBSCOOK BAY, MAINE

Approximately 6,800 people live in communities that circle Maine's Cobscook Bay, with some towns as small as 355 people. Located in Washington County, the eastern most spot in continental United States, this region is comprised of nine municipalities (Eastport, Perry, Pembroke, Dennysville, Edmunds, Whiting, Trescott, and Lubec, and the Passamaquoddy Nation Reservation at Pleasant Point). Two miles of Cobscook Bay separate Eastport and Lubec.

The communities in this region have a long history of economic dependence on natural resources. Today, salmon aquaculture, fishing, and sea urchin harvesting are significant sources of income. The aquaculture industry, once the hope of this region, has experienced up and down cycles. At this moment every salmon in all the cages have been temporarily removed, causing many people to lose jobs. The town of Lubec lost approximately 25% of its jobs in the year 2001, due to the closing of the sardine plant and the salmon troubles.

The newer jobs are less likely to come to the Cobscook Bay region, but are targeted more in southern Washington County around Machias. For example, a major telemarketing center there offers \$6.25 per hour and had 200 jobs to fill.

The Maine Community Foundation chose this region because of the Bay's rich biodiversity, the importance of environmental protection and management to residents' heritage and economic well being, and the presence of community leaders (i.e., Dianne Tilton).

The communities and region of Cobscook Bay were highlighted in a recent report produced by the Maine Sustainable Development Working Group. "Communities need to determine when there is value in preservation, when change can create new, sustainable opportunities, and when both preservation and change can occur. Tension is inevitable, but solid community-based planning can be rooted in community-identified values. The communities surrounding Cobscook Bay provide one example. These towns engaged in a series of public conversations that sought to identify the most valued aspects of community life. They then determined what steps could be taken to strengthen these values to benefit the community, the economy and the environment.

After a time, towns that had always worked as separate entities agreed that their long over-harvested and polluted clam flats needed revitalization. The communities sought technical assistance and outside funding from the Maine Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, which supported their initiatives. The Cobscook Bay communities restored

and re-seeded the flats, thus ensuring the productivity of the flats for present and future generations.”⁹

Tangible changes are evident in people’s language and actions. “The Cobscook Bay regional identity is stronger than ever”, according to Will Hopkins, director of the Cobscook Bay Resource Center. There is now a Cobscook Bay Boat Works, a Cobscook Bay Aquaculture, and a Cobscook Bay Fishermen’s Association.¹⁰

The farmer’s market in Eastport provides another example of real change. Ford Foundation funds under the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project were used to buy signs for farmers to use in advertising a farmer’s market. The market is “so much more successful than expected. Some of the younger farmers are selling organic foods and sell through the farmer’s market. The farmers can’t put the food out fast enough. A lot of senior citizens have rediscovered the taste of home-grown food. Food sells out almost immediately.”¹¹

The gradual and measurable shifts in thinking and practice are also evident to Dianne Tilton who works with community people in Cobscook Bay and other parts of Washington County from her position with the Sunrise County Economic Council. “Being mindful of connections between the environment and the people used to be an isolation; now, there is a recognition that environment and the economy are linked.”¹²

As an illustration of this conclusion, she cited the aquaculture project at Lubec’s High School. Rose Binda, a participant of the Cobscook Bay sustainable community project, started this project as part of her elementary school science class. It is now part of the technical education center. She and students worked closely with Bob Peacock, a local researcher and businessperson dealing with sea urchins. Students learned how to grow things using aquaculture and now sell vegetables and flowers grown hydroponically within the aquaculture operation. They are being entrepreneurs, learning how to be businesspeople, and are seeing first-hand how the environment (i.e., water) and the economy go together.

The emphasis is still on the slow, incremental changes. For these two community leaders and many of the people they interrelate with, a demonstrable change has occurred. For many others, especially those stuck in poverty and hard-times, the impact of this project is not as evident. Jim Dow (former staff person for The Nature Conservancy located in Cobscook Bay and now the director of the Blue Hill Heritage Trust), acknowledges the valuable seeds sown by Will Hopkins and Dianne Tilton and still concludes that “very little attitude change [outside of the work of Will Hopkins and Dianne Tilton] has taken place because of the [sustainable community] project.”¹³

⁹ *Sustainable Maine: Action Steps 2001* (March, 2001). Pp. 7-8.

¹⁰ Telephone interview with Will Hopkins, October 30, 2001.

¹¹ Interview with Will Hopkins, October 30, 2001.

¹² Telephone interview with Dianne Tilton, November 5, 2001.

¹³ Telephone interview with Jim Dow, November 12, 2001.

He has seen the small family farms go the way of agro-businesses and the ups and downs of the aquaculture industry. Although he was embraced publicly as “if I was another fisherman” (a high compliment), he fears that the trust he built from years of personal interactions will not transfer to his successor at The Nature Conservancy. Personal trust needs to be earned in rural Cobscook Bay. As previous assessments found, trust and relationships are key forerunners to tangible substantive accomplishments. Personality, attitude, and time cannot be substituted with money, outside resources, and good intent.

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HARDWICK, VERMONT

This rural town of 3,000 people, located in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, is the market “hub” for the surrounding area. The region relies on forest products, agriculture, small businesses, and tourism. Hardwick’s Main Street hit a low point in the winter of 1992 when three buildings in the center of town burned to the ground. The community had already been faced with economic hardship when the once thriving granite industry closed down decades earlier. Many residents travel considerable distances for work.

When the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project began in 1993 the challenge was how to revitalize Main Street, retain its “sense of place”, and create economic opportunities that correspond with a natural resources-based (i.e., forestry) economy.

An informal group, the Hardwick Business Group, was created in 1994 by a group of local businesspeople (primarily women). They focused on marketing and promoting businesses primarily on Main Street. A few years later, most of the once-vacant storefronts in Hardwick were rented and the group's efforts expanded to support businesses in nearby towns. In 1997, the group became an official program within the Hardwick Area Chamber of Commerce (an eight town regional organization).

Hardwick's progress is full of ups and downs. The Hardwick Area Chamber of Commerce still has a part-time person, but the energetic Marilyn Rogerson left due to illness and there "hasn't been the same head of steam. Staff hours have been cut because of inadequate revenues".¹⁴ Various Main Street businesses have closed; others have opened. A new website/technology business started in an empty building and now has 13 employees. The "Daniels block" buildings have been fixed up and "makes the downtown look better."¹⁵ Yet, two restaurants have closed (due to personal reasons). A new Chinese restaurant is in the process of opening.

Some initiatives begun during the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project in Hardwick have taken root. For example, the snowmobile map was revised last year showing business along trails. Copies are available for distribution at no cost to Hardwick Area Chamber of Commerce members. Advertising and a fee to non-members helps defray costs. The trails, themselves, have been expanded with more marked trails available. In a second example, the town has taken to flying banners across Main Street, based on the popularity of the first ten banners made available to non-profit organizations and paid for with Ford Foundation funds.

According to Linda Fox, a long-time participant in the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project, "It is a slow process integrating groups, but it is happening. This is a major progressive step."¹⁶ Progress needs to be measured by a gradual change in attitude (i.e., from defeatist to hope) and in resilience (i.e., the replacement of stores with others rather than vacancies).

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¹⁴ Telephone interview with Jane Johns, November 4, 2001.

¹⁵ Jane Johns, November 4, 2001.

¹⁶ Telephone interview with Linda Fox, October 27, 2001.

MT. WASHINGTON VALLEY ECONOMIC COUNCIL, NEW HAMPSHIRE

The Mt. Washington Valley region is a popular tourist destination in northern New Hampshire. This region is located two and one-half hours north of Boston and consists of twelve towns, including two in Maine (Albany, Barlett, Brownfield, Chatham, Eaton, Freedom, Fryeburg, Jackson, Madison, Ossipee, and Tamworth). The area's population is approximately 35,000 people. The median age is 37 and the median household income is \$28,100. The booming economy has created economic opportunities and expanded incomes for many residents and newcomers; but there are still significant pockets of poverty.

The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation chose the Mt. Washington Valley region for a number of reasons. Surrounded by the 750,000 acre White Mountain National Forest, the valley's tourist economy and quality of life is dependent on its natural resources. Yet, the growing number of retail shops and name-brand factory outlets draws many day visitors creating traffic congestion as well as offering potential opportunities to keep more dollars within the region. Recent advances in computer and telecommunications technology enable more people to live and work in the valley region.

Another key ingredient of this region is the existence of an organization called the Mt. Washington Valley Economic Council (MWVEC) which was established in 1991. Tom Deans, Vice President of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation is a resident of the valley and an active board member of this organization. He saw the advantages of investing in an existing organization and knew that its participants connect economic improvements with natural resources protection and management, and with strong community life.

The Council has nurtured a new economy (e.g. high technology) for the region focused on diversifying the economic base, creating higher paying jobs, and taking advantage of the rural quality of life and the beautiful natural environment. Members, staff, and volunteers have systematically surveyed needs; provided education, training, and business networking programs; funded technology infrastructure; and "grown" this new industry to the point that the Mt. Washington Valley Economic Council recently signed a three year lease to control and manage a high technology incubator building and has signed a Purchase & Sales agreement for land to create a high tech village.

The critical questions now are whether this new industry will bring needed and desired well-paying jobs to the North Country (term for northern New Hampshire including the Mt. Washington Valley region) and whether the Council can focus some of its attention to other ways that can improve the lives of people and the health of the natural environment. The high technology incubator and village are designed to attract more of the 70,000 high tech jobs that existed in New Hampshire in 2000. Only 700 jobs

were then located in the North Country. The high tech niche was also chosen by the MWVEC because these kinds of jobs are not highly dependent on roadway transportation and do not strain the environment.¹⁷

There seems to be no debate about the value of the high technology priority. The MWVEC has already received support from many volunteers, excited by this enterprise, and financial support has been promised by the federal government.

The concern posed by MWVEC President Steve Knox: “Right now, some people think this is sustainability. It isn’t. It is just one component. We, fortunately, have a new executive director (Jack Cuddy) who is aware of this and won’t let us lose sight of other things.”¹⁸

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NORTHEAST STEWARDSHIP PROJECT, VERMONT

The Vermont Community Foundation chose Concord in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont initially to support an innovative, but beleaguered, Natural Resources Program at the Concord High School. It was also selected to help build interest and support for sustainable forestry in an area where many people’s lives are linked to forestry and where there had been substantial clear cutting. Concord, a regional hub, has a population of approximately 1,500 people and is located in South Essex County, which has approximately 6,000 people and is the least populated county in the state.

The Northeast Stewardship Project (NESP) still exists as a loosely connected group, but the Board of Directors has not met for over a year.¹⁹ “There was value when it was running. The ember is still glowing and there is an interest, by a few people, in bringing it back.”²⁰

¹⁷ Telephone interview with Jack Cuddy, November 7, 2001.

¹⁸ Telephone interview with Steve Knox, November 3, 2001.

¹⁹ Telephone interview with Jim Wood, October 29, 2001.

²⁰ Telephone interview with Will Staats, November 8, 2001.

During the duration of the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project, the Northeast Stewardship Project was incubated, nurtured, flourished, and ebbed. Always there was the problem of lack of people in this rural part of the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. When Jim Wood, a forester, active board member, and part-time staff person, was able to provide local credibility and leadership, the project had a focus and life. When he left to become the forest manager for a large timberland owner investor (itself a success story influenced by his involvement in the NESP), the organization “faded” (Jim Wood’s term).

NESP began with the support of a beleaguered high school natural resources program (which has struggled recently but is still part of the vocational educational system) and expanded to include training for loggers (which extended the life for two years of the Logger Education to Advance Professionalism program. Several years ago, NESP board members and Jim Wood (then part-time staff) realized that the number of people willing to participate in workshops was waning. So, the focus shifted to exploring the concept of a regional natural resources/forestry center. A consultant report indicated that the economic feasibility is not there. Having placed their limited volunteer attention to this project, the board came to a dead-end point.

This is not the only community participating in the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project that faded after the failure of the group’s sole project focus. STA-NORTH in New Hampshire had the same fate. Both regions have very limited “social capital” or “social and institutional capacity” to draw upon. They have small populations; extremely few volunteers; no academic and few non-profit organizations; and have other competing public needs such as job generation and education.

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STA-NORTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

The STA-NORTH region of northwestern New Hampshire is comprised of approximately 4,000 people from the village of Groveton in the town of Northumberland and the towns of Stark and Stratford. Groveton/Northumberland is the largest at 2,500; Stratford is next with 950; and Stark is the smallest town with 500 people. These townships are located within Coos County that has the slowest increase in population and employment of the ten New Hampshire counties since 1920. The name reflects the desire

of some people to entice new residents and visitors to travel north, beyond the southern tier of NH communities and destination places.

The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation chose this region because of its forest-based economy, its concerns in early 1993 with the potential closing of the major employer, a mill, and because of the presence of a citizens organization called STA-NORTH established to deal with this crisis. The Wausau Paper Company purchased the mill and the crisis abated. Still, the dependency mindset of many townspeople remains, making it difficult to organize and get support for new ideas and projects.

STA-NORTH lost its direction once the mill stayed in business. “None of us realized that STA-NORTH needed to redefine itself.”²¹

The small band of hard-working board members tried hard to find projects that would work financially and appeal to local people. A milk and water bottling plants were not deemed to be economically feasible at the time. A regional craft market brought some people out on summer weekends but didn’t have the staying power to be worth the time and effort. The land that was used for a few years was no longer available and key volunteer board members either moved away or went on to other activities.

The remaining funds, generated from the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project and from local support at town meetings, were distributed through small grants for local projects. “The most noticeable change is the willingness of communities to invest in themselves”.²² Groveton, for example, leveraged a project grant with matching town funds to buy banners and planters during the Christmas holidays.

In several cases, STA-NORTH helped create local organizations that continue to exist on their own. Groveton and Stratford now have historical societies and beautification committees.

The issue is what value does a regional entity have in this particular place? It seems, in hindsight, that the three communities do not have a natural affinity sufficient to attract support for a regional organization or even a regional outlook. Economically, the hub for communities in northern New Hampshire is Lancaster, farther south. Perhaps, if the boundary had been drawn differently to include Lancaster, then there might have been an economic opportunity offered by linking communities together. The STA-NORTH participants had overwhelming odds against them from the beginning of this project.

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²¹ Telephone interview with Marcy Lyman, November 30, 2001.

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WESTERN MOUNTAINS ALLIANCE, MAINE

The western Maine mountains region consists of small typically New England towns with rolling hills, working farms, lakes, fertile river valleys, and forests. Forestry, agriculture, outdoor recreation, and light manufacturing are the key economic activities. This large region is 12,020 square miles or almost 38% of the state. It comprises four counties: Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, and Piscataquis. All of Maine's 50 highest mountains are in this region. The estimated 152,440 people living here in 1994 is a little more than 12% of the state's population. "Four of the six poorest counties in Maine are located in the western mountains region. There is chronic out-migration of youth, underachievement in post-secondary education, and loss of traditional skills such as secondary wood products and manufacturing".²³

The Maine Community Foundation selected the greater Farmington region because of its natural resources dependent economy, the existence of the Western Mountains Alliance (a regional citizen organization dedicated to building community), and the presence of several effective community leaders.

The Western Mountains Alliance (WMA) has parlayed its credible, regional image into an organization relied on by government, other non-profits, and citizen groups for its networking capacity, organizational development, and community representation. Moreover, WMA has helped infuse a sense of "sustainable community" into its own work and the efforts of others.

Most of the core people who "did deep reflection early on stayed the course. Others who joined in over time have a deeper understanding" of what it means to build healthy (i.e., environmentally, economically, and socially) communities.²⁴ The advantage of maintaining a critical core of people is that they spent the time to understand complex concepts, to develop trusted relationships, and to experiment with how to implement the linkages among the environment, economy, and society within their region. They also developed a strong, coherent voice representing these interests within and outside the western mountains region.

²³ Grant application prepared by the Western Mountains Alliance and the Coastal Enterprise Inc. staff (undated, 2001).

²⁴ Telephone interview with Deb Burd, October 22, 2001.

WMA's approach is to reach out to people within their four county region and to partner with others on projects and initiatives. When the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project began the geographical focus was on the Greater Farmington, Maine region. By now, there are projects and active board representation in and from all four counties. A recent example of this kind of collaboration is with the Piscataquis Economic Development Council. "Most economic development organizations are fairly traditional. WMA pushed them to broaden their capacity through QLF (Quebec Labrador Foundation) exchanges. We encouraged them to look at their natural resources assets. They are now involved in some value-added wood products."²⁵

No organization is without its struggles, financially and institutionally. WMA has had tensions within the board; and now seems strengthened from its organizational evaluation, leadership training, and more secure financial support.

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²⁵ Interview with Deb Burd, October 22, 2001.

Project Analysis

The community snapshots provide some insights into the status and progress of each of the six selected communities participating in the Ford Foundation-funded, statewide community foundations-supported, Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project.

This section offers some findings and conclusions based on a critical review – across all six communities -- of five topics, expressed as questions:

1. Have the principles and concepts of sustainability been embedded in community decisions and actions? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Has economic development reverted to traditional definitions or expanded to link with environmental, social, cultural, historic, transportation, information technology, public health, and other community concerns? How has the concept of desired economic development been affected by the economic up and down cycles?
3. Have new leaders really replaced the old guard? Who are these new and emerging leaders? How can they be discovered?
4. Have the key sustainable community project leaders changed/grown personally? If so, how?
5. Have the organizations been able to survive without the prestige, personal support, and financial grants of the Ford Foundation and the statewide community foundations? What happened during the transition phase after the official close-out of the project by the foundations?

Each topic will be addressed, first by some quotations from the previous assessments and then by information gleaned from a series of telephone interviews conducted in October and November of 2001.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY

Although there is still a lot of confusion about its vagueness and practical applicability, people refer in conversations, news articles, and in written documents to concepts such as healthy community, ecosystem management, regional development, and long-term investments. Historical, geographical, and communication barriers have been broken down, as indicated by the number of people who attend meetings in other communities and the number of projects which involve joint actions from historic competitors [November 1997 assessment report, p. 15].

The goal of a healthy environment is not the first priority and does not have the same level of drawing power as does a focus on community betterment. People in these small communities are worried about the basic necessities of life: jobs, retaining trained and educated local people, acquiring basic needs such as housing and health care, and a safe environment including good drinking water and air quality. They also value their rural and scenic landscapes and way of life [January 1996 assessment report, p. 10].

Building sustainable communities is not easy. It takes time, patience, effective leadership, engagement of people who have differing viewpoints, and listening and responding to the different voices in the community. It also means change – pushing for new ideas and mechanisms, encouraging new leaders, and often dealing with threatened and hostile people who resist that change [January 1996 and November 1997 assessment reports, p. 10 and p. 21, respectively].

Sustainable community results are predicated on education, community and individual capacity building, and attitudinal shifts. Yet, to be both adequate and long-lasting, they need to be “locked” into enforceable mechanisms such as laws, regulations, institutional policies and programs, and financing incentives/disincentives [November 1997 assessment report, p. 23].

Key Finding:

The extent of understanding and progress towards implementing such a vague and illusive concept as “sustainable community” depends on timing, circumstances, perceptions, and language.

Take the relatively isolated Cobscook Bay region of Washington County in rural eastern Maine. In 1993, people from the 9 communities and Native American reservation surrounding Cobscook Bay did not identify themselves as part of a region, no less one defined by natural (i.e. water) boundaries. Individuals initially fought with each other to gain access to the Ford Foundation funds and struggled to create an organization (Sustainable Cobscook Community Alliance) which eventually folded.

By the end of 2001, Dianne Tilton had incorporated sustainable community thinking into all of her community economic development activities in Cobscook Bay as well as in communities throughout Washington County. In her capacity as staff with the ten year old Sunrise County Economic Council, she no longer espouses traditional economic solutions. Instead, she has fully embraced the role of being the resource person empowering others in communities to have hope, to act, and to achieve results aimed at valuing and taking advantage of their environmental and community assets to achieve economic improvements.

She developed, through a pilot project in Cobscook Bay, a specific community planning process that asks community people to share their values, define their community’s assets, describe their ideal community, and look at their community as a whole rather than focus only on job creation.²⁶ This process evolved from her growing

²⁶ Interview with Dianne Tilton, November 5, 2001.

appreciation for and belief in the “sustainability” approach and sustainable community model.

Recently, Dianne created a visual and procedural model for capturing the essence of the kind of economic development she is now promoting and how development fits within a broader community context. She labels her model “Nutritional Pyramid for Healthy Rural Communities”, patterned after U.S. Department of Agriculture’s food pyramid and on her belief that “sustainable community doesn’t work here as a term”.²⁷

At the foundation or core of the pyramid is “**Progressive Communities**”, encompassing five ingredients:

1. “Build Social Capital” (i.e., informed and empowered population);
2. “Improve Access to Financing”;
3. “Support Education” (including job training and technical assistance);
4. “Build Physical Infrastructure”; and
5. “Build Leadership”.

The middle layer, moving upwards, is called “**Healthy Businesses**” and includes:

1. Create jobs;
2. “Plug the leaks”;
3. Educate Future and Existing Businesses; and
4. Nurture Innovation.

The smallest, top triangle in the pyramid is “**New Businesses**” defined as “encourage development from within and without”.²⁸

She explains the value of her approach and model by using a commonplace example. Usually, economic development focuses on jobs and businesses – just like a person who decides to improve his/her old house by painting it. Although this step is desirable and needed, it won’t save an old house from falling apart. So, her model places an emphasis on restoring the old house’s foundation so that it won’t collapse; then, people can decorate it. Already, a person developing adult education courses has become intrigued with her model and may use it in teaching.

By the end of 2001, Will Hopkins’ efforts to help organize fishermen and create a marine-based Cobscook Bay Resource Center have succeeded. The Cobscook Bay Fishermen’s Association was a fledgling group two years ago and is now “known and recognized” as an organization with a mission statement supporting “the conservation, enhancement, and sustainable use of the marine resources”.²⁹

This progress was not easy to achieve and came along with plenty of challenges, frustrations, and sticky situations for Will Hopkins as he strove to build relationships and

²⁷ Interview with Dianne Tilton, November 5, 2001.

²⁸ Interview (November 5, 2001) plus a hard-copy computerized version of the model.

²⁹ Telephone interview with Will Hopkins, October 30, 2001.

trust among people who tend to resist organization and support, and to create a sustainable marine resource industry in a place that fears change.

At times, he was ostracized or criticized for taking a leadership stance. It took months and months of personal courage, hard work, and persistence (with the critical assistance of The Nature Conservancy/Jim Dow as the initial non-profit institution for Will's project). Slowly, he built credibility by acting like and being a local; and by reaching out to local fishermen, local officials, educators, and scientists.

The indicator of success is now clear. Will Hopkins is accepted as a community leader.³⁰ Moreover, his project has produced tangible results particularly in terms of providing useful research and educational resources and in helping create groups that have successfully lobbied the state legislature for marine-related changes.

Even the term "sustainability" has become acceptable and familiar over the years. In 1993-4, "folks didn't like to use the word. Now, they still don't like the word because it is so common and trite!"³¹

"Sustainability" isn't just a word; it has meaning to the fishermen, the salmon aquaculturalists, the foresters, the cranberry growers, the small businesspeople. Approximately two years ago when Will Hopkins created the Cobscook Bay Resource Center he raised the question about the use of the word "sustainability" in the organization's mission statement. Board members wanted it there because they had become comfortable with its meaning. The Center is designed to "encourage and strengthen...sustainable development in the Cobscook region, the Bay of Fundy..."³²

This mission has driven the organization to create partnerships with laboratories, government agencies, local officials, educational facilities, schools, and other groups who want to restore, preserve, maintain, manage, and utilize the marine resources of Cobscook Bay. An independent office exists with staff, producing maps, data bases, analyses, and educational materials. Using advanced Geographic Information System (GIS) software, the Center produced maps of the region and the Bay of Fundy that are used by historical societies and clam management groups, among others.

There have been disappointments. "Barriers to regional cooperation are deep and often invisible". It still takes an hour to drive from one end of Cobscook Bay to another, making inter-community discussions and meetings difficult. Besides geographical distances, there are cultural divides.³³

In addition, there are forces beyond even the region's control. Regional recycling efforts, for example, are "worse off now than they were five years ago because there is

³⁰ Interview with Jim Dow, November 12, 2001.

³¹ Interview with Will Hopkins, October 30, 2001.

³² Same as above.

³³ Same as above.

little market for recyclables. Eastport ended up burning recycled newspapers” because there was no market for recycling them.³⁴

The second community example also comes from Maine. Interestingly, both Maine sustainable community sites were chosen by the Maine Community Foundation based on the presence of effective community leaders. Their “social capital” provided internal sparks and rallying points for action. Yet, in both cases, success was not certain. There were many tough times getting organizations established or re-aligned; people to think differently about how their natural resources and rural quality of life fit in with their economic development aspirations; and financial and technical resources provided to augment and then replace the Ford Foundation funds.

The Western Mountains Alliance (WMA), like Sunrise Country Economic Council, was a pre-existing regional organization. Its staff person, Deb Burd like Dianne Tilton, was and is a lightning rod in pressing the organization to embrace a “sustainable communities” way of thinking and acting. Initially, the Western Mountains Alliance created a sub-entity called “Sustain Western Maine” to house the Northern New England Sustainable Communities project. Many of the board members served on both organizations and the board leadership was virtually identical. By 1997, at the official end of the Ford Foundation and Maine Community Foundation project support, Sustain Western Maine celebrated its success and became an integral part of the Western Mountains Alliance.

The WMA benefited from having an “engine” piloting ideas and projects around community sustainability and then, later, by incorporating its elements, principles, mission, and projects. This set-up allowed Sustain Western Maine to be entrepreneurial, experimental, and not held accountable to the same requirements as the more established parent body. None of the other five sustainable community sites used this strategy. Either they created entirely new organizations or else adapted the sustainable community initiatives directly into an existing organization.

There is certainly no preferred way of introducing change. However, the model of western Maine illustrates the advantages of having a separate, yet linked, entity to explore what “sustainable community” means for that place.

In a recent grant application, the magnitude of the acceptance of “sustainability” is conveyed as well as the extensive accomplishments achieved by the Western Mountains Alliance in collaboration with the Maine Community Foundation. “Our Collaborative is working on an integrated set of development initiatives in the western mountain region of Maine and at the state and national level to spur private, including philanthropic, and public investment that addresses intractable poverty in Maine’s rural regions...The Collaborative was first organized in 1994 ...under the Ford Foundation-funded Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project. Our purpose was to reverse the decline of the economies of western mountain communities. Initial efforts were focused on simple principles: good stewardship of our resources, respect for

³⁴ Same as above.

community values and ways, rigorous application of good ideas and new capital, and equitable sharing of economic and other benefits. A regional planning and educational process began to help local communities understand the basic tenets of sustainable development, identify assets, and design programs that met the region's needs."³⁵

The grant application summarizes some of the key achievements of the Collaborative such as the regional heritage project that has now become the independent Mountain Counties Heritage Inc; a branch office for business counseling/lending for the Coastal Enterprises Inc. (a community development finance institution); the Sustainable Development Working Group (WMA is a founding member); and extensive capacity-building and leadership development for individuals and groups within the region.

DEFINITION AND IMPACTS OF A CHANGING ECONOMY

Economic development is the top priority of all six communities, although its definition evolved over the four years to interconnect with environmental and social/quality of life concerns. Jobs, businesses, and tax revenues are still driving forces in community decisions, but practitioners in these six community projects emphasize the importance of encouraging development which builds on a community's assets – its people, historic character, traditions, environmental resources and landscapes, and rural quality of life [November 1997 assessment report, p. 9].

A distinction can be made between communities where economic conditions are often fluid, changing, and dependent on outside expertise and inflow of newcomers, and those whose economic development accrues to long-time residents who work for a few employers or for themselves in economic activities which have been around for some time. The latter communities are more resistant to change, innovation, expertise of outsiders, and to the use of technologies such as the internet [November 1997 assessment report, p. 19].

Building local wealth based on community assets is a common and effective strategy in these rural Northern New England communities. Techniques include both traditional economic tools such as investments in infrastructure (e.g., piers, streetscapes, housing rehabilitation) as well as non-traditional ones such as local currencies, peer-lending programs, and bartered exchanges. Key ingredients to attract local and tourist dollars are developing a community identity or "niche" (e.g., Cobscook Bay region, Mt. Washington Valley region, Western Mountains region), creating destination points, designing and implementing a marketing campaign (e.g., business directories, joint advertising, sponsoring celebratory events), and establishing partnerships (e.g., business helping business). The goal is not simply to buy, but to buy local products and services [November 1997 assessment report, pp. 19-20].

³⁵ Undated copy (2001) of the application, supplied by Deb Burd, executive director of the Western Mountains Alliance Coastal Enterprises, Inc. will act as the lead funder and applicant.

Economic improvements can sometimes come from focusing on non-economic concerns, such as education, health care, or quality of life. A good economy means more than jobs – it means having health care benefits, access to adequate housing, a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment with life, and time to be with family and friends [November 1997 report, p. 20].

Key Findings:

Communities go through cycles of ups and downs, just the way people do. It can be disheartening to be in a down mode, but experience from these communities indicates that persistence, hard work, focus on the vision, identifying and building on community assets and needs, and even time breaks that cycle. The answer is definitely not to chase after outside dollars or to impose solutions on communities.

A natural-resources based economy makes sense for these rural communities in northern New England given their forests, ocean fronts, lakes, farmlands, and mountains – and their small populations, large land areas, and perceived scenic beauty. Yet, the challenges are enormous in creating profitable businesses that provide well-paying jobs for local residents that also do not harm the environment and respect people’s quality of life.

Geographical isolation, loss or severe downsizing of a community’s major employer, resistance to change, inadequate institutions and infrastructure to compete in today’s global economy, and the recent economic recession are hurdles that these people face. Their rugged individualism, independence, and resilience allows the most isolated and/or poorer people to be primarily unaffected by economic cycles and others, who embrace change, to act and succeed.

Take the Mt. Washington Valley, New Hampshire region as an example. The Mt. Washington Valley Economic Council (MWVEC) pre-existed the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project and was chosen as the entity to take responsibility for one of the six community projects. Some of its initiatives at expanding the region’s economic base were successful and others were not.

MWVEC was and remains a primary economic development-oriented, regional organization whose primary purpose is to help produce jobs, especially well-paying ones that are filled by current and new residents. Yet, members, especially the officers and a few board members (Tom Deans in particular), saw and still perceive that their purpose is broader than the typical, traditional economic development focus that measures progress and success based on the number of new jobs created. Its mission is to “create economic opportunity”.³⁶

From business and community surveys, they learned that certain gaps existed that might be filled by local business activities. So, for example, they tried to match the need for local stitchers to sew outdoor clothing garments with the need for jobs by people on welfare. Despite working with business people to create training programs and funding

³⁶ Interview with Steve Knox, May 22, 1997 reported in the November 1997 report, p. 9.

the purchase of stitching machines, this initiative failed to attract sufficient interested workers³⁷. The need, from a business perspective was evident but the social, personal need turned out not to be satisfied by full-time work in this field.

This experimentation provided a useful lesson to MWVEC participants in that they needed to know more about their potential “client base” before investing in match-making activities.

In another example, the client base was there, but the timing was off. MWVEC worked hard to get the local board of selectmen in Conway to transfer authority and funds to their organization to administer the regional revolving loan program perceiving that some businesses could not gain access to traditional financing. By the time that this transfer occurred, the economy was booming and businesses did not need the Council’s loans because they could get money from banks.³⁸

These lessons helped sharpen MWVEC members’ knowledge of market forces, economic conditions, human needs, and their own philosophy and strategy for addressing their mission. The role of the MWVEC evolved as the region experienced changes coming through an economic recession in 1993-1994 and into an economic boom which continues today.

Jack Cuddy, the current executive director of MWVEC, describes this process as one in which the “Council was trying to help people grow in an environmentally friendly way”.³⁹ Various activities did not work while others succeeded in helping identify the region’s assets (e.g., attractive landscapes, four season recreational opportunities, enjoyable quality of life, educated workers especially the newcomers, entrepreneurial spirit).

Ultimately, the Council decided that it was best suited to creating a better climate for economic opportunities rather than trying to create jobs directly.

For the past few years, the Mt. Washington Valley Economic Council’s focus is to reduce the technology divide between northern and southern New Hampshire. The group aims to help existing and new start-up businesses by providing connections to the “information highway” and, recently, by investing in a high tech village park that will encourage incubator businesses.

The bottom-line is that the Council “wants an economy that complements what we have. We want to give the kids that are able to come back or stay here a livable wage...We want to attract businesses that do not strain our environment and are not dependent on road transportation.”⁴⁰ At the moment, the stars are aligned. Interest is high;

³⁷ One Year Later Assessment, April 1999, p. 6.

³⁸ One Year Later Assessment, p. 23.

³⁹ Telephone interview with Jack Cuddy, November 7, 2001.

⁴⁰ Same source.

volunteers are stepping forward; funds are forthcoming; and the defined role of the Council is clear and welcomed within the region.

MWVEC President Steve Knox supports this orientation “1,000 percent. We can change things”, he believes. “I think that our success empowers us – towards what we are capable of doing. I don’t think our success will undermine our quality of life. This is our social capital (that we are creating through the high tech village park)”.⁴¹

Despite this positive outlook, Steve Knox is concerned that the Council not lose sight of its sustainability perspective. His measurement of success includes an indicator that the “north country” (i.e., Mt. Washington Valley region) not “lose its charm and become another southern New Hampshire”.⁴²

The Council is determined to create a “strong environmental ethic and practice on the 80 acre village site”⁴³ Can the MWVEC create environmentally sound, community-defined economic opportunities that also produce well-paying jobs for current and future residents?

The other New Hampshire sustainable communities project provides a very different economic development story from the Mt. Washington Valley region. The STA-NORTH grouping of three towns (Stark, Stratford, and Groveton) was chosen by staff from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation because of an existing citizens organization bearing that name, formed to deal with the potential closing of the mill – the area’s dominant employer. So, the economic condition was the critical concern for this small group of participants.

The STA-NORTH example is a lesson in what happens when the economic crisis disappears. In hindsight, it appears to some participants that “there is no logical regional sense of being”.⁴⁴ Although there are strong links among the three communities, it doesn’t seem as if there is an economic nucleus defined by them. No matter what project STA-NORTH participants tried to create (i.e, a milk bottling plant, a water bottling plant, a regional crafts fair), the economic profitability just wasn’t there.

Ultimately, STA-NORTH gained recognition not only for trying hard but also for its support, through small community grants, of local projects. In essence, the organization’s economic contribution provided was in “growing community assets”.⁴⁵ Although valuable, this role was insufficient to generate new volunteers, attract community leaders, and re-define the “niche” for STA-NORTH after its mission of saving the mill was accomplished. The two operating mills “appear to be o.k.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Telephone interview with Steve Knox, November 3, 2001.

⁴² Same as above.

⁴³ Same as above.

⁴⁴ Telephone interview with Marcy Lyman, November 30, 2001.

⁴⁵ Same as above.

⁴⁶ Telephone interview with Kay Doherty, December 2, 2001.

Moreover, other people's economic initiatives focus on the Lancaster area, south of the STA-NORTH communities. For example, the North Woods Chamber of Commerce, according to Kay Doherty from Groveton and a long-time active board member of STA-NORTH, "changed its name but still focuses on the south".⁴⁷ Given these circumstances, it is not clear what, if anything, STA-NORTH could have done differently to improve to produce improved economic conditions. Adding to this predicament, the three communities are small in population, have few volunteers, and have a tradition of not trusting what they call "flatlanders", people born from places outside of the area.

The Concord, Vermont community experience provides yet another perspective. According to Jim Wood, communities in southern Essex County (where Concord is located) still have the same definition of "economic development" that they always did – which is the value-added forest products industry.⁴⁸ The frustrations are not with the approach, but with the reality that this natural-resources based economy is still not profitable. He cites an example, the Essex Timber Company, as a business that "still can't find markets and people because it is economically very marginal and personally risky."⁴⁹ He is currently working for the largest forest owner in the region and concludes, for the moment anyway, "I'm not sure how you do that [make a go of a value-added forestry management economy]."⁵⁰

LEADERSHIP

Building civic capacity in a community – by encouraging and training leaders, involving volunteers, creating and using networks, developing and relying on partnerships for projects – is THE key ingredient for improving the lives of people and the environment [November 1997 assessment report, p. 12].

Most of the participants – the leaders and core members – of the sustainable community projects are not the traditional movers and shakers. They are retired persons, small business people, community organizers, middle-level managers. They may be drawn to more prominent leadership positions because they want to make a contribution and fill a leadership vacuum" [May, 1996 assessment report included in the January 1996 report, p. 4].

Curiously, conventional indicators such as 'dynamic' or 'decision-makers' didn't arise [during a discussion on "effective rural leadership" conducted on April 29, 1995 with participants from the six sustainable community project sites]. Instead, the group broadly defined leaders as people who help others achieve their goals. Their definition of leader included a balance of qualities that could be loosely described as: guides who help people see possibilities; connectors who bring people and resources together, and

⁴⁷ Same as above.

⁴⁸ Interview with Jim Wood, October 29, 2001.

⁴⁹ Same as above.

⁵⁰ Same as above.

enablers who can carry out an activity and encourage others to do the same” [January 1996 assessment report, p. 7].

Key Finding:

Effective rural community leaders are not those defined by traditional qualities. Rather, they are people who are given recognition and stature by others because they are trusted, respected, caring, supportive, and helpful.

Presence or Absence of Community Leaders

Many of the six community sites have had difficulty finding, attracting, and retaining community leaders for their sustainable community projects. “Community leaders” are those people who actively participated and took responsibility within their communities and/or in the entity that managed the sustainable community project.

Sometimes, the obstacle is a very limited pool of people and even fewer with time to volunteer. In these places (e.g., the two projects located in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont and the northwestern corner of New Hampshire/STA-NORTH communities), the few leaders got burned out, discouraged, frustrated, as well as had to devote their time to paid work.

In another case, Western Mountains Alliance, there are some old and new leaders. Some of the current leaders who are involved in the regional organization (Western Mountains Alliance) are the same ones (more or less) as were in these positions in 1993.⁵¹ Some of “the old ones are gone – died, retired, or moved. A new crop of leaders – not anybody that people have heard of before – are now active”.⁵² There has been extensive and conscious outreach to people in counties within the organization’s jurisdiction beyond the Greater Farmington region (e.g. Piscataquis and Oxford Counties) and these links add to community leadership capacity.

Mt. Washington Valley Economic Council is an example of an organization that “has different leaders now, which is good. The more active leaders are the technology-type people. Some are retirees. Some are successful businesspeople who clearly see the importance of technology. New people have stepped up to the plate. When there were openings on the board, we looked for people who have been active in our new high tech village project. Three new board members came on the board this way.”⁵³

Defining the Effective Rural Community Leader

Linda Fox from Hardwick, Vermont believes that there are three, valuable types of leaders needed for community-based projects: (1) start-ups; (2) doers; and (3) the long-timers.⁵⁴ Some people are adept in initiating ideas and getting projects started. Once things are organized and structured, they tend to move on. Other people are focused,

⁵¹ Interview with Deb Burd, October 22, 2001.

⁵² Interview with Theo Kalikow, November 29, 2001.

⁵³ Interview with Steve Knox, November 3, 2001.

⁵⁴ Interview with Linda Fox, October 27, 2001.

organized, results-oriented and are effective leaders in guiding specific actions and achieving specific results. These kinds of leaders often are impatient in the start-up phase because clarity is not yet there and there is too much conversation and too much process for them. The third type of community leader is committed for the long-haul regardless of the ups and downs.

Her insight is that different types of community leaders are needed for these different phases of community-building and project planning and implementation.

On occasion, people exist who are skilled, experienced, and comfortable with all these phases and these people are to be prized. Examples include Will Hopkins (Cobscook Bay, Maine), Dianne Tilton (Washington County, Maine), Deb Burd (Western Mountains Alliance, Maine), and Steve Knox (Mt. Washington Valley). It is not surprising that these people have been and remain deeply committed to the concept of creating more sustainable communities and are very patient, persistent, and resilient.

When asked for their ideas of how to define the most effective rural community leader for the northern New England region, sustainable community participants offered the suggestions captured in the quotation mentioned in this section. They realized that the qualities are not those that typically characterize traditional leaders.

Additional words of wisdom were sought during this assessment interview process to help describe, from the practitioners' perspective, the kind of people who have proven to be good community leaders. Rural community leaders are people who:

- “Have been at it a long time and take personal responsibility...I am continually surprised by the number of natural leaders who turn up.”⁵⁵
- Peers select and recognize as leaders. These people are not the typical public spokespeople. They have skills and proficiencies that are probably not needed to be public leaders. They are trusted; have good common sense; don't know how to set and follow agendas or chair meetings.⁵⁶ They have trust from “overlapping constituencies”.⁵⁷
- Are driven by a passionate commitment; people who “sparkle”.⁵⁸
- Are listened to and highly respected. Elected officials and politicians are the last group that I'd go to”.⁵⁹
- Know a lot about their communities – other people, places, traditions.⁶⁰ And recognize the need for change.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Interview with Will Hopkins (Cobscook Bay), October 30, 2001.

⁵⁶ Same as above; also Paul Cillo (from Hardwick, Vermont), October 31, 2001.

⁵⁷ Interview with Marcy Lyman, November 30, 2001.

⁵⁸ Same as above.

⁵⁹ Interview with Steve Knox, November 3, 2001.

- Have great people skills, are patient, tolerant, and can “roll with the punches”.⁶²
- Are unlikely to be scientists, technical experts, urban persons who have strong theories and ideas about rural life, or data-oriented people.⁶³

Finding New Community Leaders

Because of the value of hindsight and the passage of time, participants interviewed for this assessment were asked to suggest specific techniques for discovering community leaders. Often, project managers, foundation officers, and volunteers struggle to figure out whom to invest in, especially in the primarily rural settings of these communities in Northern New England. Therefore, it would be valuable if there were some clues from seasoned practitioners about how to identify potential and emerging “authentic” community leaders, i.e., people who truly represent “community voices” and not their own personal agendas.

Here are some recommendations:

1. Go and mingle. Community leaders are discovered by attending community forums, organizational meetings, and public discussions. Look for people driven by their passions, show a sparkle, and get involved in activities.
2. Talk to people and find out whom they refer to. When someone is frequently referenced, then this person is a trusted and respected person.
3. Find people who have lived life and experienced its ups and downs. Sometimes, this means seeking people who are somewhat older, more mature. Find people who have succeeded and failed.
4. Read local papers to find the more publicly visible leaders who are quoted, serve as spokespersons, and are identified with community concerns.
5. Look for people active in something before. Many community leaders involved in the sustainable community projects were previously leaders in regional health organizations, school board/educational groups, business organizations, and forestry management initiatives.
6. Ask these questions: What is your passion? What have you done in the past? What groups and kinds of activities have you been involved in over a five-year period?⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Interview with Jim Dow (Cobscook Bay), November 12, 2001.

⁶¹ Interview with Steve Knox, November 5, 2001.

⁶² Interview with Jim Dow, November 12, 2001.

⁶³ Same as above.

⁶⁴ These questions were suggested by Linda Fox, October 27, 2001.

PERSONAL GROWTH

Why have these critical staff people [in each of the six community sites] stayed involved, especially over the past year? They are personally dedicated and committed to sustainable development as a concept, to their organizations, and to their communities. In the past year, some of them describe the tremendous amount of personal growth that they have experienced. Will Hopkins, for example, describes how much he has learned about management. “You can’t do everything. I have to share a lot. I have to turn it off”. He is referring to the transfer of his office from his home to rental space, the hiring and delegating responsibility to another staff person, and the changes his project is going through in expanding its scope.

Jim Wood, in a similar situation, describes how he has gained a “world of funding exposure”. He feels that he is more comfortable and “better at” meeting with funders, more confident in terms of the direction of his organization. He attributes a clearer focus both to his own growth and to the growth of the entity. As a professional forester, he is accustomed to practical, immediate results-oriented work. He is now more able to participate in “idea building” discussions and is pleased to be participating in the development of a community forest project [One Year Later Assessment report, p. 19].

Key Finding:

To a person, all of the active participant community leaders and some of the most dedicated volunteers describe how much they have personally changed and grown through their involvement in the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project.

Will Hopkins, director of the Cobscook Bay Resource Center, is a good example of a person who began in 1993 with considerable credentials and gained additional personal and professional insights, skills, and satisfaction from his involvement in a project independent from and yet related to the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project.

In the recent interview for this assessment, he explained how much he feels that he has grown. He has accomplished many of his tangible goals; has succeeded in getting financial and staffing support for the new regional center; and is now “trying to ground work in our personal health. A number of us have realized that we can’t do everything. We need to say ‘no’. We recognize something in ourselves that is just like the limits of growth. I’m evolving a rule that states ‘If I’m indispensable to an activity, then I probably should not do it.’”⁶⁵

Deb Burd, the long-time director of the Western Mountains Alliance and a community-organizer type person, was also very skilled and experienced in 1993 when WMA created the “Sustain Western Maine” project that she also staffed and guided. Her

⁶⁵ Interview with Will Hopkins, October 30, 2001.

conclusion after these many years is that “I’ve gained knowledge and experience in this field. I long for more opportunities and experiences to share with others.”⁶⁶

The kinds of personal growth changes are sometimes obvious and visible, such as Jim Wood’s ability now to run meetings, set agendas, and work on proposals or Linda Fox’s ability to create and sell a profitable business. Other changes are more subtle, such as Dianne Tilton’s complete change in her approach to community economic development and her ability to re-orient the Sunrise County Economic Council to promote what she calls “progressive communities”. As she describes herself, “I’ve gotten more confident with this approach. I push people to stop whining and look at their assets.”⁶⁷

Some participants have parlayed their experiences into new jobs and even new careers. Jim Wood, for example, believes that his current job was due, in part, to his exposure, credibility, and experience as a board member and part-time staff person for the Northeast Stewardship Project. Several volunteers in the Sustain Western Maine project created technology-based information and education initiatives that turned into full-time careers.⁶⁸

Even for some participants, who experienced tremendous frustrations and anxieties, came to an understanding about their communities and themselves. For example, Kay Doherty looks back at her years of efforts and struggles and realizes that people in this region have a “self-esteem situation. Anyone who steps up becomes a target.”⁶⁹ Others involved in the STA-NORTH project have similar feelings and are “happy” to be away from the tensions (anonymous). Yet, they also express a sense that there is a gradual “willingness of communities to invest in themselves”⁷⁰ – a change that can be attributed to the subtle impacts from the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project.

TRANSITION PHASE

The Ford Foundation and the three community foundations have an investment in the continued progress of the communities. During the transition period (before Ford Foundation funds end), the foundations need to⁷¹:

- *Determine their own roles and contributions at the end of this phase.*

⁶⁶ Interview with Deb Burd, October 22, 2001.

⁶⁷ Interview with Dianne Tilton, November 5, 2001.

⁶⁸ November 1997 Assessment report, p. 19.

⁶⁹ Interview with Kay Doherty, December 2, 2001.

⁷⁰ Interview with Becky Newton, November 13, 2001.

⁷¹ *The following recommendations were included in the November 1997 assessment report, pp. 26, 27:*

Some entity needs to replace the Ford Foundation in providing operating support to pay for part-time community staff. Given the finding that such capacity is essential for sustainable community building and given the current difficulties and barriers in becoming self-sustaining for this financial aspect, such continued support is critical. If the community foundations do not choose to fill this role, then who will?

- *Decide whether and how additional project support will be offered.*

Given the finding that community building takes years and given the investments and accomplishments to date in these six communities, the community foundations need to assist the community practitioners gain access to follow-up project funding by making some of their grants eligible for such purposes and by brokering opportunities between the community practitioners and other funders.

- *Conduct Periodic Assessments*

The Ford Foundation has committed to support periodic evaluations/assessments to understand longer-term impacts. Such an assessment in five and ten years can help people document progress, discover more lessons from practical implementation experiences, and determine the usefulness of concepts such as the different phases of community building, the hybrid model of sustainable community building, and the three approaches (i.e, capacity building, organizational building, and mentoring/nurturing).

Key Finding:

The bottom-line is that many of the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project participants feel grateful for the support they received from the Ford Foundation and the three community foundations and abandoned once the project officially ended in 1997. Others feel that the time and resource commitment was sufficient to seed projects and also not create a dependency on outside funders.

The Northern New England Sustainable Communities Network

The Northern New England Sustainable Communities Network, supported by the three community foundations for a couple of years, provided an initial and welcomed thread for the participants of the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project. They, at least, were provided with an organized gathering to socialize, share lessons learned and ideas for the future, and stayed connected. After the first such annual gathering the attendance of community practitioners from the six sustainable community sites declined and was replaced by a mixture of students, consultants, and people from non-profit organizations as well as community practitioners from other places.

Linda Fox spoke for many of the active participants in saying that “I saw immense value in having annual gatherings. When you work in your community, you are

more alone and need the energy of sharing with others.”⁷² This opportunity faded by the second year after the official end of the project and disappeared altogether afterwards.

The value of the Network as a connector of ideas and people did not happen for the participants of the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project. Jim Wood from Concord, Vermont wondered if value might have accrued more if “there could have been an already existing organization like the Northern Forest Center rather than something new [i.e., the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Network]”.⁷³

Transferability of Lessons Learned

Another type of anticipated transition did not really occur, according to participants. Several people, such as Will Hopkins, Dianne Tilton, Jim Wood, and Deb Burd, had been groomed to be communicators explaining the value and results of the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project. They contributed as panelists and workshop leaders during the annual all-community gatherings. A few were invited to address foundation officers and board members. Yet, the conclusion in hindsight was spoken by Jim Wood... “I always wondered why I wasn’t asked to speak more. I wonder if Susan Clark [staff person hired for the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Network] replaced the need to use me and others as spokespersons.”⁷⁴

Jim Wood commented further that “I still have the willingness to speak and advise others. I still worry about re-inventing the wheel”⁷⁵. His concern is that other community-based projects will not know about or learn from his and his peer’s experiences.

Community Capacity to Continue

As described⁷⁶ in the three earlier assessment reports, community capacity is key to community-based project results and the kind of capacity needed in these primarily rural northern New England communities and regions depends on long-term support. It cannot be built in a year or even in three or four years.

Some of the sites (e.g., the two in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, the STA-NORTH project in New Hampshire, and aspects of the Cobscook Bay project in Maine) require a long-term commitment to grow the capacity internally and to transition themselves (with new leaders, new organizational structures, new attitudes, new networks, new contacts) into circumstances where they can be self-sustaining.

Will Staats from the Concord, Vermont project commented that “We had to have an Eddie Gale type person to continue.”⁷⁷ Gale was described in the 1997 assessment report as the “friendly schemer” who relies on hands-on, nurturing and mentoring

⁷² Interview with Linda Fox, October 27, 2001.

⁷³ Interview with Jim Wood, October 29, 2001.

⁷⁴ Same as above.

⁷⁵ Same as above.

⁷⁶ November 1997 assessment report, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Interview with Will Staats, November 8, 2001.

techniques. This approach worked very well while Eddie Gale was paid and available to provide that special level of attention and support. Once the project officially ended, his role and responsibility ceased. Though he tried to help out, as a volunteer member of the board of the Northeast Stewardship Project, his life shifted towards other priorities.

People involved in places such as Mt. Washington Valley, New Hampshire and western Maine where community capacity was greatly nurtured and expanded during the years of the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project faced a different predicament at the end of the project.

In the words of Steve Knox, President of the Mt. Washington Valley Economic Council, “I didn’t like the way the whole Ford Foundation project unraveled. They forced us to take a good hard look at our strengths and weaknesses, like economic diversity and long-range planning...and then they walked away. There wasn’t the follow-up to help us move forward. In hindsight, that wasn’t fair. We need a pool of implementation funds or whatever. We weren’t prepared to scurry for funds. We didn’t develop that kind of expertise to get funding. We needed to be introduced to funders. It is a very competitive game for not a lot of money. We needed the funders to introduce us ... to provide names, contacts...and we needed the credibility and stature of the Ford Foundation and community foundations’ as our partners.”⁷⁸

These community people did what was expected and hoped for – they changed themselves and their communities – and then they were cut loose with no transition phase. Through their accomplishments they set themselves apart from many of their colleagues in their communities and from foundation officers and boards who are still bound by their traditional definitions of eligible projects.

From a different perspective, Will Hopkins felt that “the Ford Foundation and Maine Community Foundation did the right thing by not establishing dependency and by supporting the Cobscook, Maine region for an appropriate amount of time”. He acknowledged that in his region, The Nature Conservancy played a role “way outside its comfort level”. They stayed involved during and after the transition period.”⁷⁹ He added that now is an “appropriate time for the foundations to say – Where should we go from here?”⁸⁰

The Transition That Could Be

Several people interviewed offered their own personal suggestions for how the four-year (1993-1997) investment in the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project could still be successfully transitioned.

1. Convene a gathering of all the participants for another opportunity to reflect, share, and celebrate.

⁷⁸ Interview with Steve Knox, November 3, 2001.

⁷⁹ Interview with Will Hopkins, January 29, 2002.

⁸⁰ Same as above.

2. Provide introductions, by the original funding partners, to appropriate people and organizations that are likely to invest in rural, community-based, natural-resources economy/quality of life projects.
3. Invite the interested practitioners to be spokespersons describing their experiences and story-telling so that others can really understand what was learned and how these lessons are relevant elsewhere.
4. Fund a new initiative based on the next phase in the evolution of building more sustainable communities in northern New England. This project would not be continuation funding; rather, it would be a new initiative.