



Strategy Session: Summary Notes

20-20 Vision for the Valley Project

January 29, 2009

The LWV of the Upper Valley convened a group of leaders (manager, select board, planning board/commissions) in five towns in the Upper Valley, to brainstorm topics that cross town boundaries. Below is summary of that session.

Good Planning Across Municipal Boundaries – *Brian Shupe, the Sustainable Communities & Energy Program Director for the Vermont Natural Resources Council, introduced the agenda for the evening and presented a brief overview of a public planning process and the benefits for citizens and municipalities within the Upper Valley region. He explained that community and regional planning is a dynamic process for improving the welfare of people and their communities and regions by creating more convenient, equitable, healthy, efficient, and attractive places for present and future generations.*

He further explained that planning helps community members envision the direction their community grows and will help them find the right balance of new development and essential services, protection of the environment, and innovative change.

Shupe acknowledged that most Upper Valley communities are already engaged in a planning process, most commonly around issues associated with land use and public facilities and services. He then reviewed those issues that transcend municipal boundaries where planning would benefit from greater inter-municipal communication and coordination, and that those topics would be the subject of the evening's discussion.

He presented a case study of the Mad River Valley Planning District, a "union municipal district" formed by three Vermont communities to jointly plan for the future of the three-town area. The Planning District was formed in the early 1980s, and has maintained a consistent yet flexible planning effort since that time.

DISCUSSION NOTES:

1. Serving the Population Efficiently and Well

Participants: Michael Mayor, Hanover Plan Bd; John Jalowiec, Hartford Plan Comm; Gregg Mandsager, Lebanon manager; Richard Stucker, Norwich Plan Comm.

Discussion Leader: Deb Maes, UNH extension.

Initial query: What issues do you see as important regionally?

- Recreational facilities, e.g. shared rinks and aquatic center
- Infrastructure costs, e.g. shared purchasing
- Emergency planning, e.g. medical center, ice-storm response
- Medical facilities & education (DHMC outreach is good; Dartmouth cultural benefits are important, other outreach is less visible) (Too bad no public transit for evening events)
- Everything starts with jobs
- Very concentrated employment base, but also very rooted here
- Forbes Magazine identifies region as relatively invulnerable to recession (though some recent job cuts)
- Increasing cooperation in Human Services, Recreation, Public safety (why do we have 3 aerial ladder trucks?), Purchasing, Landfill (likely future shift from Lebanon to Hartland) and Housing (more regional planning and support, but not necessarily regional distribution of affordable housing)

Strengths	Weaknesses
Existing cooperation in joint purchasing of asphalt; Enfield-Lebanon human services; 120 corridor study; and Advance Transit	Disconnect between cost of living (especially housing) and lower income levels
Cultural activities	Lower income people incur high transport costs to avoid high housing costs.
Environment: Connecticut River & Recreational opportunities (skiing, hiking, etc)	AT doesn't reach outlying areas, or run on evenings and weekends.
Low unemployment - economic robustness of big employers: Dartmouth, DHMC, VA, PO, Telecommuting	Property tax is too high: People have reached their limit on their capacity to pay for their home and lands.
I-89 and I-91	Loss of long-distance passenger service
Strength for families: a place for all generations; both young & old are drawn here	No incentives for a town/city or even a region to build work force housing.
Generally classless society	Reliance on service wages do not cover cost of living for many families.
Wide access to medical care	Insufficient access to dental care
	Water supply may limit more concentrated workforce housing
	Uneven quality of public educational facilities and curricula
	Lack, or poor distribution, of visitor services (hotels and meeting rooms)

Opportunities	Challenges
Airport could (and once did) handle a lot more traffic; but the pull of Manchester (even with spotty bus service) is very strong	Limits on tax resources - extreme dependence on property tax
Revitalized rail	Parochialism
Aerial tramway, VT to DHMC—cheap bypass for congestion?	Better jobs, upgrading earning power more than adding population
Sharing the costs of affordable housing may be more practical than “fair share” distribution	
More shared police functions to reduce duplicative staffing; improve specialized services; and provide backup, e.g. existing interconnect of Hanover and Lebanon dispatchers	

Scribe: Douglas McIlroy *Following comments provided by scribe:*

Key words that came up in the discussion: DISTRIBUTION and PAROCHIALISM

The weaknesses and challenges cluster around issues of distribution of resources and economic opportunity. This is not to say that we need colleges and malls in every town. Equitable access to facilities and services is not the same as uniform distribution thereof. Parochialism is a powerful force for maldistribution.

2. Maintaining a Healthy Environment

Participants: Julia Griffin, Hanover manager; Nicole Cormen, Lebanon City Council; Rebecca Stewart Enfield, Select Bd.

Discussion Leader: Steve Taylor

Strengths	Weaknesses
Tradition of stewardship	Limits on solid waste capacity
Shared values	Finite sewer capacity
Land-based businesses (forestry and agriculture...)	Lack of information about sustainability of groundwater
A working landscape	Transportation impacts
Public involvement/commitment	Fragmentation of open space
Private and public outdoor spaces	
Proximity of woods, hiking	
Diverse and healthy ecosystems	

Opportunities	Challenges
Chance to do the right thing now	Inter-town, -county, -state growth management
Encourage green initiatives with tax incentives	Government regulation v property rights
Interconnection of water systems between towns	Recent media PR bringing increased attention to the Upper Valley
Public educational programs on sustainability of resources	Broadband access
Greater environmental emphasis in development, building design, rehab	Need for agricultural opportunities for beginning farmers. Remove barriers to entry.

Scribe: Anne Morris

3. Getting Around the Upper Valley

Participants: Brian Walsh, Hanover Select Bd; Karen Liot Hill, Lebanon Mayor; Sara Nunen, Norwich Select Bd; David Saladino, Enfield Planning Bd; Peter Gregory – Two Rivers RPC

Discussion Leader: Len Cadwallader, Vital Communities

Strengths	Weaknesses
Confluence of 2 interstates & numerous state highways	Airport is underutilized & solely supported by City of Lebanon
Long history of transit support – started as partnership towns & businesses	Railroad network underutilized
Advance Transit –30 th anniversary	Parking to use the bus is limited/unavailable
Enfield park & ride, Hartford proposed Rte 5 park & ride (near schools)	Hanover Main St. parking challenges & limited parking opportunities in Norwich
Social consciousness that predisposes residents to use public transit (New England ethic, transplants are self-selected & inclined in the same direction	Transit-related infrastructure not well developed - need shelters, park & rides, & schedules
Knowledge-driven economy & awareness	School busing system is weak – adults can't ride the bus
Commitment to service	Public safety budget is high due to poor design
UV Trails Alliance	Dispersed housing settlement patterns makes us auto-dependent
Rail trail & other bike-pedestrian amenities	Topography – geography

Norwich Transportation Committee; Hanover, Lebanon & Hartford bike-pedestrian committees	State of NH real impediment (e.g., substandard maintenance on Rte 4 bridge, now trucks drive through downtowns & destroy roads designed for local traffic; red listed bridges)
Hartford railroad station & Lebanon airport	States of VT& NH have automobile focus and training for road infrastructure.
Successes in communities working together	Deferred maintenance

Opportunities	Challenges
Stimulus funding	Oil prices too low
Making AT more efficient by expanding service to 7 days/week & extended hours	Ability to build infrastructure using impact fees
North-south & East-west rail corridors – light rail options?	Culture of convention – still design system for the car first
Get rid of school buses and use AT	Rural areas
Fiber optic might encourage telecommuting	State & National policy focused on cars & roads, not other modes of transportation

Scribe: Joanna Whitcomb

4. Balancing a Diverse Economy with the Region's Housing

Participants: Christine Walker, UVLSRPC; Tim McNamara Lebanon Plan Bd; Bruce Riddle, Hartford Plan Comm; Nancy Collier, Hanover Plan Bd; Dan Johnson, Norwich Plan Comm; Steve Schneider Enfield manager.

Discussion Leader: Kevin Peterson, NH Charitable Foundation

Strengths	Weaknesses
Huge amount of public engagement in region	Traditional zoning approaches segregate land uses, keep business/industries and housing separate, forcing long commutes
Strong sense of Upper Valley identity	NE Topography, weather and a dearth of developable land make construction very expensive; the required infrastructure is greater than value of the project --- leading to increased housing costs/rents.
Relatively strong economy (ranked one of the most recession-resilient regions)	Fewer people to serve on local/town boards and committees.
	Documented shortage of workforce and affordable housing (2002 Thibault study, which is currently being updated by UVLSRPC)
	Creation of jobs outpaces the creation of housing, adding to the 'imbalance'
	Long commutes between where many people live and work.

Opportunities	Challenges
Attract businesses to surrounding towns where housing is located.	Lack of federal and state funding for infrastructure improvement/expansion/new systems (water and sewer).

Share infrastructure--water and sewer based on topography not on town boundaries (some of this is being done now)	Two states, two gov't structures, little or no county gov't capacity, nor regional coordinating body
Share planning resources--common data sets, access, platforms	No forum for discussion of major regional issues
Public perceived to be AHEAD of decision-makers in some instances	Convincing voters to support the good information needed to make good land-use decisions (resources, staff, data, tools, GIS, etc)
Dartmouth could play a role and serve as a catalyst.	Few mechanisms in law to connect economic-development and housing decisions
Build on the strong UV identity	Perceptions of class differences from town to town
Share revenues across towns	Parochialism--town-centric views among some residents
RPC can play a greater role	Small towns serve the core, lack their own facilities, infrastructure and/or services
Share in purchase of materials (example - asphalt), services, resources	Money is barrier. Tax structure, reliance on local property taxes to fund services, esp in NH
Bring back the old Connecticut Valley League for inter-scholastic sports--would tie the region closer together	
Regular regional "roundtable" to build relationships, address issues, share success stories, work together (Syracuse given as one example)	

Scribe: Barbara McIlroy

5. Addressing the Challenges of Climate Change

Participants: Tom Gray, Norwich Planning Comm; Kate Connolly, Hanover Select Bd; Ken Morley, Lebanon Planning Bd.

Discussion Leader: Tom Kennedy, SW-RPC

Strengths	Weaknesses
Population density not yet terrible	Public transportation exists, but not supported by state
People are aware of climate change	Public transportation inadequate
Alternative power sources – wind farms	Not enough Park and Ride lots
Restoration of rail system	Lack of Broadband
Alternative vehicles now under design process	Dartmouth uses heavy oil
Tele-commuting possible and occurring now	Jobs in more expensive housing market, causing people to drive to work
Locally decent public transportation system	Don't have workforce housing near jobs
Dartmouth beginning to build "green"	Living in valley is a weakness because we can't use wind energy there
	No tax breaks for energy-saving devices
	Solar power not effective – too few sunny days
	Single occupancy vehicles
	Are there institutional weaknesses that hurt our working on climate change?

	Lack of public support in dealing with issues
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Opportunities	Challenges
Availability of federal money with a significant chunk for energy	Economic breakdown – slows opportunity to do things
Federal policies will change	Have to learn to consume differently
Encourage utilities to change policies	Payback on efficiency items is low
Congress will likely pass major climate change bill in the next two years	Engaging the public – people don't really see the effects of global warming
Natural resource base in New England: lots of wood here	The government is not progressive on efficiency – political opposition to change
“Nearly new” shops discourage consumption	Economic problems have gotten all of the public attention

Scribe: Susan Cohen

Wrap up, next steps... (entire group exercise)

- Tremendous amount of good in the region – lots of coordination and cooperation and many successes.
- How do we improve upon our successes?
- Identify successes and market them.
- Regular round tables – getting together with local officials
- Most effective round tables may be to address pragmatic issues (i.e., procurement)
- Regular forum – even loosely structured
- Build institutional relationships
- Provide consistent forum time and a variety of opportunity for learning and experiences.
- Take small steps committing to a number of times to meet annually to create institutional relationships
- Rotate location of forum – Hartford, Hanover, Lebanon, etc.
- One concern about the press and having open meetings – feels that press likes to pit one town against another and a regular forum might provide an opportunity to create controversy
- Consensus to get together, identify where we agree and how we can work together.
- Great opportunity to know one another – be sure to have informal time
- Consider a quarterly or semi-annual summit level discussion in the region – perhaps bring in a speaker to address a specific topic (i.e., economy & housing; agriculture, land conservation --; ‘state of the states’)
- More visionary round tables to build on community – bring those “isolated” elected officials together to think beyond boundaries

ACTION:

Vital Communities with 3 RPCs agreed to organize the next event in a few months with the participants or town managers providing suggestions for speakers/topics

A LWV note on this exercise: Clearly, this meeting is the beginning of a conversation that should continue, and we are pleased by the dynamics of this event. HOWEVER, it is our hope that the discussion will grow broader to include more communities and the broader public. We would like to see a consensus grow about the future, a *2020 Vision for the Valley*.