

GETTING COMMUNITY INPUT

A Better Way to Plan and Grow

by Jane Lafleur, Friends of Midcoast Maine



iStockphoto

What do the towns of Newport in Vermont and Damariscotta and Camden in Maine have in common besides waterfront? If you looked only at their economic profiles, you would say “not much.” According to the 2000 Census, Newport’s population of 5,005 has an average family income of \$34,922. Damariscotta has a population of 2,041, with an average family income of \$47,105. Camden has 5,254 people and an average household income of \$56,439. What they lack in economic similarities, however, they share in community building. And they are all examples of a new approach to planning.¹

Letting the People Lead

Over the past three years, in different ways, Newport, Damariscotta, and Camden have worked successfully to make themselves better places by letting residents lead the way.

Newport, Vermont

In Newport, the nonprofit organization Newport City Renaissance Corporation (NCRC) worked with municipal staff to conduct a communitywide visioning process. The two main goals were to develop municipal codes that were more friendly to business and to help property owners and renters locate community gardens in urban neighborhoods.²

Community members were invited to participate via posters, newspaper articles, an electronic listserv, personal door-to-door visits, and a survey. The survey included questions on residents’ interest in specific activities, such as community gardens, and on people’s top priorities. Many seniors responded, for example, that they wanted neighborhood safety and porch tomatoes. Parents said they needed play areas for children.

As part of community building, a street party was held, with free food from the organic farmers association. (Hands-on training on growing tomatoes in buckets was a huge draw.) Interestingly, residents have since taken group ownership of new gardens, overseeing the production of fruits and vegetables while benefitting both health and budgets.

Residents also created new municipal codes. In 2009, the community mobilized for a five-day American Institute of Architects Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) charrette, an intense period of design activity. More than 500 people from all walks of life (including students of all ages; business people; leaders of community organizations, churches, and city gov-

ernment; landlords; renters; neighborhood people; and second-home owners) joined in the focus groups, workshops, and town meetings. The integrated approach led to the successful development in 2010 of an innovative *form-based code*. That’s a building code that helps create a particular urban form, such as walkable, pedestrian-friendly, compact communities, front porches no longer prohibited by setback lines, and denser development for closer-knit neighborhoods. With its own form-based code, Newport is encouraging more mixed uses and first-floor retail and has already reenergized its downtown.³

Damariscotta, Maine

Damariscotta, in partnership with Friends of Midcoast Maine and the Orton Family Foundation, rallied residents and businesses in 2008 to undertake a three-year visioning process called Heart & Soul.⁴ Postcards, posters, e-mails, listservs, and word of mouth aided the outreach. Special techniques included storytelling, community conversations, neighbor-to-neighbor interviews, mapping of unique places, multi-day planning, and a municipal-code-writing process that adapted the so-called Smart-Code template to Damariscotta.⁵

Approaches such as storytelling clarified individuals’ values and enabled the town to reach consensus on values held in common. People discovered that, despite individual differences, most residents valued:

- working locally,
- living locally,
- having access to nature and culture,
- being an accessible community,
- being an involved community, and
- having a strong sense of community.

The Board of Selectmen adopted that list in a December 2010 resolution, noting that the values and the extensive public-engagement process that led to them would guide policy and investment decisions in the future.

The process allowed Damariscotta to engage more people than ever before in community planning and in deciding how the town should grow. Unlike Newport residents, the townspeople decided not to approve the form-based code they had worked on. They concluded that until more had been done on economic development strategies, it was not the right tool to protect downtown or plan for the future. Nevertheless, participants found that the process had given them a valuable understanding of form-based municipal code, and



Photographs: Courtesy of Friends of Midcoast Maine

they expressed a hope that the high level of public engagement would continue.

Camden, Maine

In Camden meanwhile, a group comprising Friends of Midcoast Maine, interested high school students, and a few adult leaders spearheaded community-building efforts that resulted in the founding of a meeting place for young adults called the Rig. The collaboration emerged from a public meeting organized after Dunkin’ Donuts expressed interest in coming to town, generating concern about its possible effects on the character of

Tactical Urbanism

A lighter, quicker, cheaper approach to building community, *tactical urbanism* (or *pop-up urbanism*), is sweeping the country. A bottom-up concept that enables towns to test new ideas without incurring long-term financial commitments, it features five key components:

1. a deliberate, phased approach to instigating change;
2. the presentation of local solutions for local planning challenges;
3. short-term commitment and realistic expectations;
4. low risk combined with possible high reward; and
5. the development of social capital among citizens and of organizational capacity among public and private institutions, nonprofits, and their constituents.^a

Concrete examples of outcomes that continue the process of bringing people together include pop-up cafes, pop-up street carts, and the delightful PARK(ing) days, when car-parking spaces are taken over for a use as actual parks.^b

^a See Mike Lydon, "Tactical Urbanism: Short Term Action, Long Term Change," <http://patterncities.com/archives/175>.

^b See <http://parkingday.org> and http://www.boston.com/jobs/news/jobdoc/2011/12/with_a_pouf_this_pop-up_store.html.

the community.⁶ The Rig provides youth in grades 9 to 12 with opportunities not just to socialize but to experience deeper connections—with their own identity, with one another, and with the community. It is a much-needed safe place for young adults to pursue new ideas, new friendships, and new skills.

For example, youth members actively assist with the Rig's operation and help facilitate numerous community-based initiatives. Often they provide area businesses with services, and businesses reciprocate. For example, young people might shovel snow in front of shops or distribute flyers for a business, and in exchange the business might provide food for the Rig's Friday movie night. Some students have staffed tables at the local Chili Challenge and Chowder Challenge events and have worked at the International Toboggan Festival. They have raised money for charities such as Meals on Wheels, the animal shelter, the food pantry, and Big Brothers Big Sisters. Some started an Interact Club, a youth chapter of the service organization Rotary International.

Most important, the Rig has provided a place where students are becoming leaders, setting an example for their peers, and helping reenergize downtown by drawing in other young people from the five-town high school located on Camden's outskirts.

The Future

Newport, Damariscotta, and Camden are just three examples of the positive effects of bringing together citizens, governments,

nonprofit entities, and grassroots organizations in a community-based approach to planning. Community members become empowered when they can make their own decisions, lead their own meetings, and determine their own futures. Not all initiatives turn out as expected, but it is important that the path is chosen by the people who must live with the results. Without fail, the results are really what is best for them. (See "Tactical Urbanism.")

The long-term goal in communities should be to use government expertise and assistance to help ordinary people build capacity so that they can do what is needed on their own. When the community is empowered to make decisions, that is when gardens grow, students mature productively, and residents and land develop in ways that make sense to the greatest number.

None of us can go it alone. The community-building process is the opposite of following the solitary, heroic leader. Partnerships are required, often with unlikely partners. Realtors may partner with environmentalists, school children with food-pantry patrons and restaurants, teachers with activists, senior citizens with fishermen. Bankers who want to make better loans may partner with property owners hoping to develop land. Community leaders and residents may partner to plan for compact, incremental development. It is in the interest of all the parties to build communities that people will love.

When residents have the opportunity

to get together and agree upon important decisions, the resulting changes are wiser and more enduring. With everyone weighing in, we can build healthier, more vibrant, and more economically diverse and economically sound communities.

Jane Laffleur is the executive director of the *Friends of Midcoast Maine*. She is based in Camden.

Endnotes

¹ See www.patterncities.com.

² See www.discovernewportvt.com.

³ Form-based code is a means of regulating development. It can create a predictable public realm by controlling physical form, primarily through city or county regulations. Such codes are a response to urban sprawl, deterioration of historic neighborhoods, and neglect of pedestrian safety. They are an answer to single-use zoning regulations that discourage compact development, and they can provide local governments with the regulatory means to achieve development objectives with greater certainty. See <http://www.formbasedcodes.org/what-are-form-based-codes>.

⁴ See www.orton.org/who/heart_soul.

⁵ The SmartCode is a template for a form-based code.

⁶ See www.friendsmidcoast.org.

► This Communities & Banking article is copyrighted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Bank or the Federal Reserve System. Copies of articles may be downloaded without cost at www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b/index.htm.