



Berlin, NH Listening Event

Narrative Report of Small Group Sessions

November 18, 2010

Framing Statement

The out-migration of young people coupled with the in-migration of retirees has led to the “greying” of many of our towns, cities and northern tier states. An educated and dynamic labor pool of young people is often a major contributor in attracting new business & industry into a town and/or city and can lead to a more positive business development environment.

Discussion Questions

1. Has such a phenomena impacted your local community and if so specifically how?
2. What strategies have your local municipalities taken to reverse such a trend and maintain & attract young people?
3. Are there strategies which aren't being deployed which you feel would positively impact these phenomena and if so what are they?

Those involved in the discussion readily admit that the out-migration of younger more skilled citizens/workers is a problem in the North Country but feel there is little or minimal opportunities for those that stay due to the declines of the Mills and other employment opportunities. The US Census Bureau reports a population decline of 4.9% in Coos County while New Hampshire saw a population increase of 7.2% respectively.

When asked about current community development strategies being undertaken to curb this decline those involved highlighted the following.

- Municipalities and related non-profit development entities are focused on developing green economies due to the immense amount of natural resources in the area and as means to attract younger more environmentally sensitive individuals. Such examples include the Berlin Wood-Chip energy project in Berlin.
- The fastest growing sector in the Northern Tier is Health Care. This sector provides job opportunities for younger individuals and opportunities for long-term employment paying a “living wage” if one pursues additional educational opportunities that would allow one to progress from a Certified Nursing Asst (CNA) to Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN), etc.
- White Mountain Community College (WMCC) is working to assist local residents in gaining the education and skills necessary to meet today's employment opportunities and WMCC represents the ideal site to gain the education necessary to ensure the skills of the citizenry are in line with today's business needs. The most recent Census data suggests 76.9% of Coos County residents hold a high school diploma. 11.9% of Coos County residents hold a Bachelor's degree in comparison to 28% in NH.

- The new federal prison is seen by those in attendance as an opportunity to employ Berlin's residents.
- In 1999, the Community College System of New Hampshire (CCSNH) introduced the Running Start program, a partnership between the Community Colleges of New Hampshire and high schools to give students an opportunity to take college courses for college credit while also completing the requirements for high school graduation. Courses taught through the Running Start program are college courses taught at the high school by credentialed high school faculty as part of the daily class schedule.
- Given the absence of high-speed internet in the North Country the development of such is considered a strategy in attracting younger individuals to the area.
- The development of Berlin as a tourism destination point is considered an important and major development in terms of ensuring a vibrant local economy.

When asked about what community development strategies are needed OR what improvements needs to be undertaken to curb this decline those involved highlighted the following issues or barriers to development.

- A positive attitude – Residents due to the Mill closings and related declines are at some level disenfranchised.
- Housing stock needs to be improved
- While those in attendance recognized the local School system are doing a relatively good job at educating the young people in the community there is "room for improvement".
- Need additional day care facilities that would allow young families to relocate to the area and find affordable, sanitary and safe childcare.
- The lack of high speed internet service is a deficit that impacts educational facilities, the potential to attract business and industry and the quality of life of its residents.
- High energy costs
- Access to finance and increasing access to state or national lenders.

Framing Statement

As the cost of a college education continues to increase at faster rates than inflation, enrollments at community colleges have risen steadily. Either as a portal to a four-year degree or as the principle *workforce development* "training organization" within your community, the role and importance of community colleges continues to grow.

Discussion Questions

1. What role do you see local colleges playing in positively impacting "structural unemployment" and workforce development?

When asked about the role of community colleges in impacting "structural unemployment" or the skills mismatch, those involved highlighted the following.

Those in attendance clearly understand the importance of local community colleges in educating local residents. This is particularly true given the current economy and the need to ensure local resident's skills match industry needs. Additionally given the high cost of pursuing a college degree, a "lower cost" options that delivers a high quality educational experience is a distinct advantage local community colleges bring during this current economic climate.

The group cited the need to be "proactive" in identifying what skills will be needed in the future as well as what skills are needed today to ensure full and robust employment opportunities.

Such program like the “Running Start” program were cited as forward thinking in that they provide high school students the opportunity of earning “transferrable” college credits at a cost of \$100.00 per course when taken at CCSNH.

The President of White Mountains Community College cited the absence of high speed internet service as a challenge in that it impacts both the operations of the institution as well as inhibiting educational opportunities for current and future students.

Framing Statement

As the tensions increase between the need for good paying jobs and quality of life, what are the ways your community can balance the two? For many communities rich in natural amenities, there is a desire to maintain the natural landscape to attract visitors to the community yet a lack of good paying jobs for the residents of the area.

Discussion Questions

1. What job growth opportunities exist elsewhere that our community can work to recruit while not sacrificing the natural environment?
2. Are there ways to leverage the natural environment without giving up what your community values?
3. Could your community be sustainable with a service based economy?

When asked about the opportunities that exist, the method by which a community might leverage such opportunities, etc. those involved highlighted the following.

- Participants suggested a strong wood based economy exists but needs do exist such as:
 - Further stabilization and;
 - A broader diversity of business for future development
- The group identified that a “culture shift” needs to take place that’s supportive of business development in the Northern Tier.
- Business development efforts must focus on smaller scale higher “value added” initiatives.
- There exists a need to invest in current assets. This includes ensuring property is properly capitalized and residents are provided the appropriate and needed workforce development and training opportunities.
- Participants cited a need to develop a Strategic Plan inclusive of environmental stewardship of the region that must be:
 - Clear and Concise
 - Includes comments and is supported by towns and cities and is INCLUSIVE from beginning to end with community/resident input.
- Participants suggested a need to develop and grow the market for wood based products while concurrently enhancing “assets”. Assets without a market or a market without the means of meeting consumer demand would be detrimental to the Northern Tier.
- History has demonstrated to the Northern Tier and its inhabitants that “outsiders” often exploit the Northern Tier’s natural resources to their benefit with little to no positive local impact. Participants suggested such a practice must end and all natural resource allocation decision should at some level include city, regional and/or community input.
- Participants suggested the Northern Tier has been over-studied with little to no compilation of all the studies that have taken place. Participants suggested the Federal Reserve could assist in pulling together and compiling all this research in an effort to define what “Rural” means for the Northern Tier and how to leverage former

studies. This would today's financial and human assets. Such a process would be forward thinking and focused on a future that supports robust and diverse Northern Tier economies and sustainable communities.

- The issue of no broad band internet connectivity rose to the surface in this group as a major impediment to progress in the Northern Tier.
- Currently there exists no strong service sector economy but a tremendous amount of growth opportunities.

Framing Statement

When the housing bubble burst, so did our economy at many levels. The recession tightened and at times choked the access to credit in both the housing and small business lending arenas. Small businesses report "new credit lines" have become the most difficult credit to acquire. This is particularly problematic as such lines of credit are often used to meet short term cash flow needs. Others report unilateral changes of credit terms/conditions by lenders have become routine and generally bring negative consequences to small business. Overall, business suggests credit (Lines of Credit, Loans & Credit Cards) is much more difficult to acquire than 5-10 years ago.

Discussion Questions

1. Based upon your experience (professional and personal) what impact has this had on small business formation?
2. What impact has the tightening of credit had on NH's current small business community?
3. What novel or new models (if any) of capital acquisition are you aware currently being utilized by existing small businesses or start-ups?

When asked about impact that the tightening of credit has had on small business formulation and/or existing businesses those involved highlighted the following.

The participants stated that in the Northern Tier of N.H. access to credit has ALWAYS been an issue. This could be due to a lack of access to state lenders (Citizen's Bank is the only state-wide bank in the area). Additionally, while a number of smaller lenders exist in the areas they lack scale and a desire for higher degrees of risk.

Given the recent recession the access to capital has become increasingly tighter limiting the sustainability of existing business enterprises and the ability for new ventures to access start-up capital.

When asked about novel or new models that existing small businesses or start-ups could access capital those involved suggested the following model.

The participants suggested a "low interest" line of credit be established that provides "bridge" financing for existing small business supportive of their capital needs thereby allowing them to weather the current financial climate.