

**The Landscape of Opportunity Symposium  
North Shore Community College  
May 20, 2005**

**Issues & Opportunities**

**A1. City and Town Centers**

1. **Common Vision:** Lack of a common vision in the community and lack of a downtown master plan: Many communities do not have a clear, up-to-date master plan, especially one that focuses on their downtown resources. Most communities do not understand who they are and what their unique assets are ("their look"). Without a plan, there is little agreement in the community on where they want to be in 10 years or how they are going to get there.
2. **Preservation Tools:** Standard historic preservation "tools" have not been very successful: The first tool that most preservationists seek is to create a local historic district (LHD), but there is a long track record showing that LHDs are so difficult to get passed that they usually don't save downtown areas. Newburyport is often cited as a great example of a downtown LHD at work - but it actually doesn't have a LHD. Demolition delay ordinances are only temporary and usually don't work unless there are viable economic reuses for the structures.
3. **Business Plan:** Downtown revitalization cannot be done on a "shoe string" and solely with volunteers: Revitalization of community centers involves more than just renovating the properties. There needs to be a clear business plan. There needs to be a way to organize and pay for marketing and other joint services similar to the way shopping centers operate.
4. **Self Image:** Many city and town centers are not seen as attractive places to be and are not marketed as such: They often suffer from fragmented marketing, confusing images, and lack of recognition by the state for their historic tourism value. They have poor signage (too much and too little - but seldom in the right places), poor entry corridors, confusing traffic patterns, and invisible or non-existent parking. In part, this is because many of our cities and towns are physically mixed - with a jumble of attractive and unattractive structures, very confusing traffic patterns, and a mess of signs. But even those that are attractive (or have attractive aspects to them) are ignored by the state tourism office, and by the state's economic development planners (although the state's new transit orient development emphasis begins to address this). City and town centers are seen as solely the purview

of the local community. They are the individual community's problem not anyone else's.

5. **Community Capital:** Lack of money for public infrastructure improvements and lack of market rate demand in downtown locations: This is the "tune" that many cities and towns are still singing and it is certainly true that there is less public money than there used to be and high renovation costs require high rental and sales prices. However, the real estate market is so strong that even the most depressed industrial cities have developers actively seeking projects. Community leadership, active grant seeking, careful resource allocation, and clearly spelling out what the community wants may be more important than money.

## A2. Managed Landscapes: Estates and Institutional Campuses

- 1) **High Land Costs** often necessitate limited development with non-traditional conservation partners (housing and office developers, for example). However, the prospect of unpopular "limited" development may erode the public and private support for the conservation project.
- 2) **High Land Costs** often mean that conservation projects must address other community needs to win support and funding (water supply protection, playing fields, affordable/senior housing, and "pure" conservation).
- 3) **Planning** is required to establish long-term relationships with owners and understand their financial (and other) needs, whether a non-profit mission, family inheritance, investment pay-off, etc, and to understand where decision-making power lies within the land-owning entity.
- 4) **Planning** is required to shape town by-laws, zoning, and tax structure to encourage conservation outcomes.
- 5) **Planning** is required to identify future uses (limited development or otherwise) and funding sources so as to be able to act quickly when properties come on the market.

### **A3. The Water's Edge I: Coastal Resources**

#### **1. Public Access**

- Identifying public ways & removing encroachments
- Maintaining public ways
- Mass State law – ownership to mean low tide
- Mass State law – access conditions for Ch. 91 tidelands licenses
- Federal law – access rights per Land & Water Conservation Fund projects
- “Visual access” – development encroaching on historic and/or aesthetic coastal landscapes

#### **2. Greenfield Development**

- Compromising ecology of coastal buffer zone and near coast waters/habitats
- Eliminating historic coastal landscapes
- Contributing to sprawling development
- Local government initiatives: Community Preservation Act & Town Shoreline options
- Preservation easements & other preservation options

#### **3. Harbor (developed) Development**

- Changes in waterfront use, e.g., fishing to condos, etc.
- Working harbor landscapes often have historic, if not commercial value
- Historic District & Tax Credit Options
- Density Bonuses for Public & Visual Access Protections
- Environmental Impact Reports (state & federal)

#### **4. Environmental Degradation**

- Water quality – pollution
  - Nonpoint source – more pavement; landscaping; agricultural runoff
  - Boat discharge
- Marine invasive species
- Use conflicts – jet skis, powerboats, fishing, kayaking, wildlife; ORVs
- Regional water quality plans
- Testing fish for consumer safety: building a coalition for improved water quality?

## **B1. Working Farms**

### **1. Education**

- Of every dollar spent on food; farmers receive approximately ten cents; transportation costs average six to twelve cents and seventy cents is spent on processing, advertising, and marketing services. When consumers purchase products directly from the farmer, more money stays in the local economy.
- There is a general lack of understanding of the value of the local food, jobs, open space, and wildlife habitats that farms provide.
- New residents may purchase their homes in an area with a pastoral setting, then become vexed by the smell of manure, blowing dust, and farm machinery on local roads.
- Nationally, advertising is designed to shape tastes and food preferences for mass-produced and distributed products. Statistics show that food travels an average of 1,500 miles from harvest to dinner plate while there is little information or funding for programs like Essex County's "Buy Local" program, which provides consumers information on the availability and advantages of eating locally grown and processed products.
- Meeting and conference planners need to be educated about the advantages of serving local products at events that showcase the region and local food needs to be readily available to meet their needs.
- Innovative programs like Community Supported Agriculture or CSA's need to be expanded.
- While fresh food tastes best, it is difficult to determine the freshness of produce unless the consumer has access to the grower. Product labels can be confusing. There presently are no requirements for Country of Origin labels. It is difficult for a consumer to know if an organic product has been transported across the county or grown locally.
- The USDA Food Pyramid does not recognize or encourage consumption of food produced and processed locally or a seasonal diet.

### **2. Economics of Farming**

- Farmers support sustainability and pursue a high quality of life, not a high standard of living. The average farmer is 55 years old. Young farmers find it difficult to begin farming because of the investment and poor returns.

- Cornfields are unable to compete with condominiums. As property values increase, rental land is being sold. When this happens farmers can lose a critical mass of land necessary to be productive. If the land is developed, there is always the potential of conflicts with new homeowners.
- Some farmers cannot afford to pick what they plant because the price they receive for the product is so low. There is lack of funding for promotion programs like the Essex County "Buy Local" Program that can provide education and advertising that individual farms cannot afford. Additionally, the Topsfield Fair is an important educational event.
- Increased energy costs raise the variable cost of farm production. Farmers are interested in seeking ways to reduce these costs and investigate alternative sources of energy.
- Information is needed that encourages farm succession and programs are needed that support young people who want to become farmers.
- The APR program provides money to purchase conservation easements on agricultural land, ensuring that it will always remain in farming. The APR program does not have sufficient funds to meet the demand. Additionally, conservation easements can be so restrictive that farmers are unable to participate in revenue generating opportunities like installing cell towers or wind towers on the property.
- Farm viability grants are an important source of funds for farmers who are looking for opportunities to explore innovative ways on maintaining their farm.
- Certain agricultural commodities like milk, needs to be processed before it is sold, making it more difficult for dairy farmers to find ways to increase their income.
- The process of becoming certified organic is time consuming and expensive.

### **3. Regulations**

- Many regulations are developed and enforced by people unfamiliar with agricultural practices. One-size fits rules do not support farm enterprises. The needs of agriculture should be considered in discussion on water withdrawals.

- The voice of agriculture needs to be heard in the development of Community Development or regional plans and when new rules and regulations are adopted.
- Agricultural Commissions can provide an opportunity for agricultural issues to be discussed within town government.
- Farmers, particularly part-time farmers need help to stay informed of new regulations.

#### **4. Taxes**

- 61A provides some relief but a farm has to have 5 acres to qualify - some farmers rent land but do not own 5 acres.
- Federal Rehabilitation Tax Program. Neither the existing federal or state rehabilitation tax credit programs reward farmers who renovate and restore a barn. They may qualify for a different tax break if they build a new barn but this acts as a disincentive to preserve community character.

## **B2. Transportation Routes: Scenic Roads, Highways & Former Rail Corridors**

1. **Highway Standards:** Highway standards at Federal, State, and local level require balancing safety and sensitive design in era of increased traffic volumes and new standards.
2. **Zoning:** Community growth under current local zoning along roads is affecting the character of road corridors.
3. **Policy:** Exploring and promoting non-auto transportation policies and methods to support community connections and reduce sprawl: former railroad network, pedestrians, rail and other public transport systems.
4. **Education:** Educating communities to improve understanding and participation in transportation developments and design.

## **B3. The Water's Edge II: Rivers & Ponds**

### **1. Water Quality & Quantity**

- **Water Quality:** Our rivers, streams and ponds are negatively impacted by bacteria from combined sewer overflows, sewage discharges and other illegal connections. Stormwater pollutants such as pesticides and road salt are also degrading water quality.
- **River Flow:** Maintaining adequate water flow is critical to restoring habitat and wildlife. The problem is particularly acute during late summer months in years with below average rainfall. Addressing this problem requires balancing priorities among drinking water, flood protection and river flow needs.
- **Storm Water Management:** Storm water management is a huge challenge in many older industrial cities. CSO outfall pipes deposit raw sewage into our rivers on average 14 times per year. In addition, the lack of pervious surfaces means that very little rainwater is absorbed back into the ground, increasing the load on the water treatment system.

### **2. Habitat Quality & Biodiversity**

- **Soil and Groundwater Contamination:** Many older riverfront areas include brownfield sites with known or suspected contamination, making it more expensive and more complicated to clean up and redevelop these areas.
- **Habitat Protection and Restoration:** Many riverfront areas have or once had tremendous biodiversity. In cases where it has been degraded, restoring local habitat is a key challenge. Protecting and restoring habitat for fish and other wildlife is a high priority. Ongoing efforts include projects aimed at restoring historic anadromous fisheries such as alewives and smelt, and protecting key resource areas.
- **Invasive Species:** Invasive species pose a huge problem for rivers and ponds, especially in disturbed/developed areas. Japanese Knotweed, Tree of Heaven, Oriental Bittersweet, and other non-native species have all but taken over in some places and are spreading rapidly across the state.

### **3. Regulation & Access**

- **Public Access:** Riverfront areas in urban/industrial communities were not historically developed to provide recreational and public access. Creating this kind of access can be challenging even when there is broad support for doing so. Improvements to public access are needed to expand waterfront and

boater access. Additional interpretive signage, nature walks, canoe ramps and other public amenities are needed.

- **Illegal Dumping:** Much of the land along our rivers and ponds is in private ownership and hence invisible to the average passerby, making it much easier for people to dump illegally. Many communities lack the resources to adequately enforce anti-dumping laws, and citizens feel overwhelmed by the problem. Continued enforcement, prevention efforts and cleanup projects are needed to address this environmental problem
- **Abandonment and Tax Delinquency:** This is a problem in communities that have suffered steep economic decline. In some cases, riverfront land has been completely abandoned, with years of accumulated unpaid taxes.
- **Regional and Interstate Cooperation:** The health of our rivers and ponds is a function of the entire watershed area, but land use and conservation decisions are generally made at the local level. Downstream communities often suffer from storm water runoff originating in another municipality or state.
- **Environmental Policy & Enforcement:** Enforcement of the Wetlands Protection Act and other environmental regulations is significantly lacking at both the local and state level. Staffing shortages and cutbacks have resulted in less environmental enforcement. Staff reductions at the state Department of Environmental Protection are of particular concern. In addition, industry representatives continue to work toward rolling back environmental regulations.
- **Environmental Justice:** Urban rivers, once the center of commerce and industry, are now usually synonymous with environmental hazards and low income and/or minority communities. Environmental justice concerns need the support of more rigorous and meaningful regulation.

#### 4. Awareness & Education

- Protecting and restoring natural resources requires an active and informed constituency. Expanded environmental education and public awareness programs are needed to educate the public about the value and recreational opportunities of rivers and ponds.

#### 5. Funding

- Protecting and enhancing the state's water resources requires a significant commitment of time and resources. Many communities simply do not have the funding or manpower to deal with these issues on an ongoing basis.