



HCI's Conference Brings Neighbors Together

The third regional conference of the Highland Communities Initiative was held on September 17, 2005 at Gateway Regional School in Huntington. The 150 participants were local leaders, board members, and volunteers from 41 towns in western Massachusetts and throughout the state.

They took advantage of the opportunity to meet new people and exchange stories and ideas about pressing rural community preservation issues. Twelve workshops featured speakers and panels of local volunteer leaders with specific lessons for others in the region, while two plenary speakers stimulated the group with encouragement and ideas from their home states of Vermont and Michigan. Brief summaries of these invaluable speeches and workshops are included here, but to reap the benefits yourself, be sure to attend the next conference in 2007! 🌿



Keynotes

Jean Richardson's Lessons From Vermont

Rural communities are more complex than most people or organizations realize. That's one of the messages that Jean Richardson conveyed during her keynote address at HCI's conference. Though the U.S. Census Bureau defines 'rural' as any place that doesn't meet the definition of urban, rural communities are more complicated than this simplistic definition. Because so many issues are interrelated, "you've got to think like an ecosystem to make things work in rural areas," Richardson advised.

After running the Environmental Partnerships in Communities (EPIC) project in Vermont for 15 years, Richardson identified several prevalent issues in rural areas including the lack of volunteers, the need to build networks of people, and the lack of cooperation between towns. EPIC provided an opportunity to pioneer several programs that addressed many of these issues at the same time. For example, a series of walks for farmers to share new methods

of grazing cattle on grass provided a value-added commodity for local farmers, enabled isolated farmers to meet each other and gain social outlets, and even decreased their level of seasonal-affective-disorder.

As the Director of EPIC, Richardson organized a series of intensive leadership training workshops for people just getting involved in community affairs, especially women—a potentially powerful force in many communities that shouldn't be underestimated. Some of the graduates of the workshops went on to run for elected office in the state government. EPIC also tapped into the power of children and found that engaging them in research and outreach around local issues was an effective way of influencing politicians. 🌿

Many of the other lessons of EPIC are contained in Richardson's recent book, *Partnerships in Communities: Reweaving the Fabric of Rural America*.

Understanding ‘Approval Not Required’ (ANR)

In Massachusetts, towns grow along existing roads, inserting driveways and houses according to the town’s frontage requirement. Roadside property can be subdivided, and the town’s Approval is Not Required, (ANR) as long as each new lot meets frontage and area requirements for a building lot. Over the years, the courts have developed an additional requirement, that there be adequate access from the frontage to the buildable portion of the lot. Attorney Syd Smithers described many cases that established the case law that defines ‘adequate access’. In one precedent-setting court case, narrow zig-zag fingers of property ingeniously connected back land with corner frontage to carve maximum building lots from a parcel. The court ruled approval could be denied because the narrow, twisting connecting portions did not provide access for emergency vehicles.

Smithers diagrammed subsequent cases involving frontage on a highway, abandoned roads, and frontage divided from the buildable portion by a river, steep slope or other physical barrier which further defined the evolution of the adequate access requirement. One lasting lesson of the session was that unless emergency vehicles can access a lot at the time of the ANR application, the planning board can deny the ANR for not having adequate access. 🌿



SYD SMITHERS DESCRIBES HOW IMPORTANT ADEQUATE ACCESS IS TO CONSIDER WHEN REVIEWING ANR'S

Activating Your Agricultural Commission

Every town loves their farms, but how do we help them stay in business? Representatives from the Massachusetts Farm Bureau, the American Farmland Trust, and Hatfield’s Agricultural Commission offered their suggestions and stories during a session about the roles and benefits of Agricultural Commissions.

Agricultural Commissions boost towns’ Commonwealth Capital scores, and once they are established, every town can tailor their Ag Commission to specific needs and projects. Some work on promoting local farms through fairs, festivals, farm maps and brochures while others focus on the passage of a Right to Farm bylaw. A Right to Farm bylaw protects farmers from nuisance claims for loud or smelly farm

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RUSSELL POWELL TELLS HOW HATFIELD'S AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION RAISED THE VISIBILITY OF LOCAL FARMS.

operations. Though farmers are protected by a state law, a local Right to Farm law serves as an effective educational tool for the community, especially for new residents who may be unfamiliar with the farming culture.

Ag Commissions throughout the area have been playing other valuable roles. The Agricultural Commission in Northfield has been helping the Select Board determine the agricultural value of land coming out of Chapter 6I, while also organizing school field trips to local farms. Hatfield's Commission was involved with the painting of an agricultural mural on a prominent tobacco barn that has helped the town celebrate its agricultural heritage. 🌿

Other sources for information include the Dept. of Agricultural Resources, CISA, and HCI.

Neighborhood by Neighborhood: Strategies for Successful Community Outreach

Conway's Ad-Hoc Zoning Committee realized that in order to obtain much-needed community input into their zoning laws, they were going to have to go out into the community for feedback. Through an HCI small grant, they hired planning consultant Jeanne Armstrong, who helped them organize a series of neighborhood meetings in people's homes. After four neighborhood meetings, a final meeting of over 50 people was held at town hall where community members discussed the final recommendations and themes.

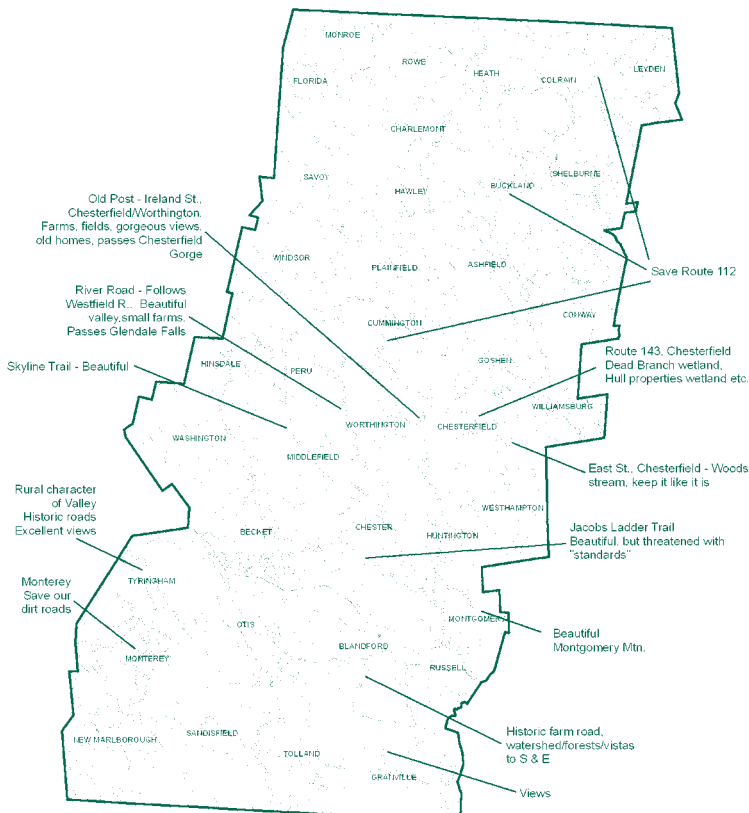
After finishing an Open Space plan and a Community Development Plan, Cummington wanted to keep their momentum going, so they followed Conway's example and conducted a series of neighborhood meetings. Once again, the change in format attracted people that had not been active in town meetings before and three additional subcommittees were formed to address important concerns. Some of the lessons learned from both of these projects are:

- Process is more important than the product
- Look to what people agree on, not what they disagree on
- It's important to listen to all members of the community
- Emphasize the positive
- Give out good information
- Neighborhood meetings create ownership and greater participation in the process
- To get good feedback, sometimes you need to get out of town hall! 🌿

You're in the Driver's Seat: Preserving Rural Roads

So much of the character of suburban and country settings depends upon the narrow, winding, tree-lined ways that define the New England landscape. It is curious, then, that we pay so little attention to the design of those roads—at least until they morph into broad expanses of treeless asphalt. For those interested in maintaining the rural character of specific roads, the Footprint Road Program is a unique and important program. Now completing its second year, this program enables roads that are basically safe and in fair condition to receive reconstruction and drainage improvement.

These roads can be rebuilt within the existing footprint and not changed in any major way. To qualify, the road must be a main street or pass by public lands, natural resources such as wetlands or agricultural lands or be designated as a "scenic road" under state law. It is hard to imagine any country road that does not meet one or more of these broad standards. The town of Shutesbury has used this program after many years of trying to improve a town road without altering its essential character. For a copy of the Footprint Road program guidelines, contact HCI. To find out what you can do to preserve this program, contact Alexandra Dawson at 413.586.5586. 🌿



A DIGITIZED VERSION OF A MAP PRODUCED BY SESSION PARTICIPANTS HIGHLIGHTING LOCAL RURAL ROADS WORTHY OF PRESERVATION.

DETERMINING THE OVERALL IMPACT
OF CONSERVATION LAND ON TOWN
BUDGETS IS A COMPLICATED PROCESS.



The Costs and Benefits of Conservation: Exploring the Fiscal Impacts of Conservation on Municipal Budgets

Fiscal Impact studies are a popular method of examining different land uses and their effect on town budgets. This workshop described the methodology and findings of an HCI-sponsored study performed by the American Farmland Trust in six Highland towns—Goshen, Granville, Leyden, New Marlborough, Peru, and Shelburne. The study examined the fiscal costs of providing public services for taxable and tax-exempt categories of land use. Consistent with other similar studies, the study found that residential land produced less revenue than it cost in services. On the other hand, working and open lands, including Chapter lands, had a net positive impact on town budgets.

The AFT study also explored the revenues and cost of services to the five types of tax-exempt lands: civic land under 5 acres (e.g., schools, town halls); civic open land over 5 acres (e.g., town watershed land); state land (e.g., state forests); conservation open land (owned by nonprofits primarily intended for open space benefits); and religious (churches, synagogues, etc., and associated property). The study found that in communities with numerous tax-exempt civic properties (schools, community centers, recreation fields, etc.), services to those properties was usually the highest cost of the above categories. The study found that conservation land has a small actual cost relative to the other types of tax-exempt land and is not a major factor in town

budgets. However, participants also discussed the fact that the benefits of conservation land, such as providing water quality, floodstorage, wildlife and hunting opportunities, tourism, and enhancing quality of life, are extremely difficult to quantify and should be included in community conversations about conservation. 🌿

Making a Living From Your Land: Profiles of Local Natural Resource Based Businesses

This conference session featured the people behind four very different and successful farms in the Highlands—Foxbard Farm, Left Field Farm, Crabapple Farm, and Blue Heron Farm—and the stories of how they got started and how they've made their farms work. The farms consisted of a grass-fed beef and forestry operation, a small-scale organic vegetable farm, a Community Supported Agriculture farm, and a horse and maple farm. Each farm has made a niche for itself in different ways—one sells specialty organic produce directly to stores and restaurants while another relies on the local support of share holders who purchase a “share” in the farm each year in exchange for a weekly portion of produce.

One farmer recommended growing crops that others don't or can't grow all year, which establishes consistency and good relationships with buyers and storeowners. Another

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SEVERAL LOCAL FARMERS SAY THAT DEMAND FOR
ORGANIC, LOCALLY PRODUCED FOOD HAS SOARED.

“I obtained good technical information from this session, and I left with critical info which will help with a project I'm working on!”

CONFERENCE ATTENDEE

farmer pointed to the diverse skill set of his employees as an important factor in running a successful farm. One of the highlighted farms diversified its operations between horses, maple sugaring, and vacation rentals, which supplement the farm income. These approaches and products are each finding success in their own way, thanks in a large part to the people that value and purchase local and organic goods. 🍁

Wind Energy in the Highlands: Planning Options for Regulating Wind Projects

The Highlands are one of the few areas in Massachusetts with significant potential for producing wind energy. After an introduction about the state's renewable energy policies and programs, participants at this session learned how two Highland towns are addressing wind energy projects. The town of Hawley received a small grant from HCI to study and develop a wind turbine bylaw. The town of Florida decided that a wind energy project's valuable tax revenue was worth encouraging, and is now in the later stages of a permitting 8 turbines. There are lots of incentives to move this renewable technology forward, and towns are encouraged to plan and evaluate their options before a project is proposed. A town's potential for wind energy is dictated by average wind speeds, proximity to the electrical grid, and access to major roads.

After much research, the town of Hawley adopted a bylaw, which addressed the application process, turbine height and setbacks, environmental consequences, turbine removal, and

road construction among other topics. The town of Florida decided that the special permit process would be a more effective way of addressing the community's concerns about a wind farm and it would provide more flexibility for both the town and the applicant throughout the process. Permitting for a 19-turbine project in Florida and Monroe has been underway for several years. It has been an enormous effort for the town's volunteer boards, and is now being litigated in the courts. 🍁

Campaigning for Success: Strategies to Get Your Bylaw Passed

Three experienced board members from the Highlands shared their stories, expertise, and strategies for getting a bylaw passed at town meeting. To start, you've got to fine-tune your bylaw according to community concerns, and it's generally much easier to describe and sell a shorter, simpler bylaw that can be tightened or added to in the future. Networking with likely supporters is the next important step, and these individuals may or may not be visible already. It's also critical to think about who will be impacted by the proposed bylaw and get their feedback and support early in the process. If your bylaw involves other town boards or employees, it is certainly wise to talk with those people before town meeting.

Reaching out to the larger community is vital to getting a bylaw passed, and the language you use can be very powerful—try to use positive terms and avoid jargon. You should also take control of how your bylaw is framed by the press and any potential opposition. Be consistent in your message and get the word out. Creating short flyers that include a bylaw summary and contact information, and passing them out at common meeting spots is an effective way of informing and educating your neighbors. Keep in mind that your strategy should be tailored to your community each time you bring a bylaw to town meeting! 🍁

Accessing State Funding for Community Projects

Two important sources of state funds were described and discussed in this session. The Community Preservation Act (CPA) enables towns to create a local fund for open space, affordable housing, and historic preservation projects through a property tax surcharge which is matched by the state. The resulting funds are controlled locally through a Community Preservation Committee and approved by town meeting. Towns of all sizes throughout the state are using

Keep the Conversations Flowing!

JOIN THE HCI FORUM AND NETWORK WITH YOUR NEIGHBORS!

The HCI Forum is an email-based discussion group for the exchange of ideas and solutions for preserving the rural character of the Highlands. Use the forum to ask specific questions and share your expertise on planning, zoning, land conservation, growth management, affordable housing, roads, state programs, and other community concerns and opportunities. The forum is a resource network primarily for municipal board members, land trust board members, and individuals interested and active in community preservation and conservation issues.

For more information and instructions for subscribing, visit our website at WWW.HIGHLANDCOMMUNITIES.ORG

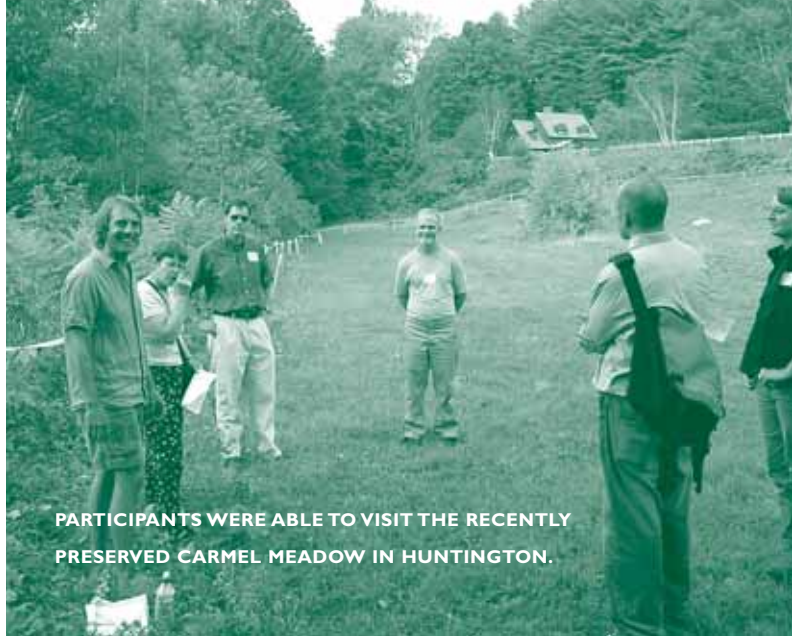
CPA funds to implement creative and beneficial projects that would otherwise not materialize. For more information, contact HCI or visit WWW.COMMUNITYPRESERVATION.ORG.

The Commonwealth Capital Fund contains twenty-one important sources of state grants for land conservation, housing, economic development, and water quality. In order to access them, communities are scored on their progress towards smart growth objectives such as preserving open space, creating affordable housing, revitalizing brownfields, and implementing progressive zoning measures. The Commonwealth Capital scorecard has been revised this year to address the concerns that the application favored larger communities. In an effort to help low scoring communities improve, the state offers Smart Growth Technical Assistance funding to pursue some of the smart growth measures contained on the scorecard. Visit WWW.MASS.GOV/COMMCAP for more information. 🌿

Affordable Housing Solutions: Community Housing Trusts

Community Land Trusts (CLT) are an effective way of expanding affordable housing options. Community land trusts typically acquire and hold land, but sell or lease buildings that are on the land. As a result, the cost of land in the housing equation is minimized or eliminated, thus making the housing more affordable. The leases are typically very long-term, assignable to the heirs of the leaseholder, and include formulas for the resale price of the house to maintain its affordability. This effective arrangement protects the house from the inflationary forces of the real estate market and facilitates home ownership for people that may otherwise be priced out.

Participants at this conference session learned about some specific housing projects in the Berkshires with pertinent lessons for communities in the Highlands. Indian Line Farm



PARTICIPANTS WERE ABLE TO VISIT THE RECENTLY PRESERVED CARMEL MEADOW IN HUNTINGTON.

in Great Barrington pioneered a unique approach by combining a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm and a community land trust. The town of Stockbridge successfully partnered with CONSTRUCT, Inc. to create a new affordable housing project by using a combination of many sources of public and private funding, which resulted in thirty units of new market rate and affordable housing. 🌿

Field Trip to Carmel Meadow

“If you care about something in your town, say something to lots of people.” Architect and activist Jeff Penn loved this meadow across from his house, and let everyone know. When it was threatened by development, he made calls, spoke at meetings, wrote letters, and found many in town who also loved the property. After a four year effort on the part of many organizations and individuals, most of the land was protected by a conservation restriction held by the Hilltown Land Trust. The parcel is tiny in comparison to most CR projects, but a highly visible jewel in town. Perseverance, compromise, and patience pulled this project together. 🌿

“I learned so much at this conference, but most importantly, I was able to connect and interact with so many dynamic, committed neighbors that are doing great work.”

CONFERENCE ATTENDEE

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