Your Place is the Highlands

Tips for Making a Difference in Rural Towns
SHARING A DREAM

It’s only natural to be concerned about the places you love. In 1999, Worthington resident Steffen Plehn knew he was not alone in his attachment to the rural land and small towns of western Massachusetts. He dreamed that all those who live here and love the wooded hills, drove the roads lined by working farms and stone walls, and enjoyed the community of town meetings and general stores, cared enough to take the next logical step — joining together to protect and plan their future.

Thanks to you, and your involvement and commitment to your community, that dream took root in the Highlands. Residents, landowners, town boards and local organizations are increasingly reaching out to one another in order to tackle the tough problems that face their communities and region. And the Highland Communities Initiative (HCI) is proud to have helped plant the seed.

Started by members of the Plehn family and The Trustees of Reservations, HCI strived to build awareness about how remarkable this region is. It was dedicated to forging connections between people who cared, and providing the best information possible to foster good decisions for their land and communities.

The future of the Highlands has always been in your hands. No single entity has the capacity, or holds responsibility, for protecting the “sense of place” that defines the Highlands. It has always come down to the passion and dedication of individuals doing their creative best given the pressures and financial limitations of working in a sparsely-populated rural area.

As HCI’s time draws to a close, we want to pass along insights from what we have learned and what has inspired us from our twelve wonderful years of working together. We hope that they will provide encouragement and assistance. If you have ever fallen in love with a place and wanted to make a difference in its future, there is no better time to act than now, and no better person to do it than you!
HCI’S FOUNDING GOALS

- Create a strong regional awareness among Highland residents about the natural resources and rural heritage of this region;
- Develop a network of knowledgeable citizens committed to providing leadership in their communities on land protection, community preservation and planning issues;
- Foster the protection of significant landscapes by individuals, land trusts, towns and state government;
- Encourage and assist the 38 towns in their efforts to preserve their rural heritage in a way that recognizes the need for housing growth and economic development.

WHAT WE’VE DONE, TOGETHER

Before HCI, the name “Highlands” was rarely heard in western Massachusetts. Now, it conjures images of long-cherished places and vibrant communities nestled in the foothills of the Berkshires. These 38 rural towns — knit together by a unique blanket of forested land shaped by years of farming and forestry, and a historical settlement pattern that defines the very essence of small town New England — comprise a region and way of life that are increasingly uncommon and vulnerable to change.

HCI is an example of how much a handful of people, given the right resources, can accomplish in a rural region. With a staff of two, a cadre of committed volunteers, and funds leveraged by community members and helpful partners, HCI was able to help towns appreciate their commonalities and protect the extraordinary natural landscapes and cultural resources of the region.

By working with individuals and local communities at the grassroots level — stimulating land conservation opportunities and forest stewardship practices, serving as the networking and support system for town leaders and volunteers — together we have permanently protected acres of farms and woodlands, preserved historic buildings, created and implemented plans and bylaws, and leveraged millions of dollars in community, state, and federal investments. Together, our efforts have also created a constituency of people who care about these landscapes and landmarks, and improved their ability to care for and protect them in the future. Over the past ten years, the HCI towns have cultivated a vibrant sense of place, community involvement, and regional connectedness. And we thank you for it!
Together, we...

- Spurred and supported 32 zoning bylaw and land use regulation updates;
- Helped four towns adopt and implement the Community Preservation Act, which uses a property tax surcharge to fund land conservation, historic preservation, affordable housing, and recreation projects;
- Awarded $383,000 in small grants to 106 town boards and organizations;
- Organized 153 workshops, conferences and seminars that cultivated a network of over 4,000 interested citizens.

TAKE CHARGE OF CHANGE

Change is coming to the places you love. Leaving their futures to chance is risky.

Residents of small towns have many opportunities to speak out and have a meaningful impact on a range of important issues that threaten to alter the land and towns of the Highlands in irreversible ways — from climate change to the fragmentation of farms and forests, the health of local economies, the fate of historic buildings, and increased, suburban-style development. Weathering these challenges will depend upon thoughtful planning, and the continued involvement of concerned individuals.

Where do you begin? From our twelve years of working with residents, landowners and volunteers, HCI has learned a thing or two about how caring people can make a difference in small town New England. These insights and success stories may be HCI’s most valuable legacy, and we want to pass them on as a way to encourage you to keep up your invaluable work!
1. IT STARTS WITH ONE PERSON’S PASSION.
Protecting a place and shaping its future takes a good deal of effort. And every positive accomplishment starts with one person taking a single action to improve the condition of something they care about. It could be simple, such as pulling a sprout of invasive garlic mustard, voting at town meeting, or volunteering at a town fair. Maybe it involves a phone call to discuss the future of your family’s land with your son or daughter.

Most importantly, if something is important to you, don’t assume that someone else will take care of it. At the same time, don’t be surprised if you suddenly energize the many kindred spirits in your community who care about the same things!

Railroad Ties: One Man’s Passion Helps Energize Chester

When Dave Pierce started the Chester on Track celebration sixteen years ago to promote local railroading heritage, few imagined it would soon grow into the largest one-day event in the Highlands, drawing 3,000 visitors annually. Dave’s passion for trains has turned into a powerful tool for economic development, and perfectly illustrates the impact that historic preservation efforts can have in a small town.

Dave began by uniting a dedicated band of volunteers to save crumbling relics from Chester’s railroad history, including the area’s magnificent stone arched railway bridges. The old train station, now the center of Chester on Track is a premier railway museum and an important local gathering place. The arched bridges, once part of the first mountain railroad in the U.S., now link a recreational trail system. With funds from HCI’s small grant program helping to spread the word, Dave and his compatriots continue to instill pride in the town of Chester by reclaiming the vibrancy of its past.
2. KEEP IT MANAGEABLE.
Big problems sometimes call for small solutions. This is especially true in rural areas where financial resources are limited, and the volunteers who make things happen can quickly feel overwhelmed. When approaching any community issue, try asking yourself, “Do we need to tackle this all at once? Or, can we break it down into smaller, more manageable steps?” This applies equally to a landowner figuring out how best to manage 200 acres of woodland, to a town realizing that its current zoning laws are inadequate and need updating.

Try, Try Again: The Push for Better Zoning in Worthington

Patience and perseverance are not only virtues when dealing with issues of rural town zoning, they’re often a necessity.

In the last 10 years, Worthington’s planning board tried five times to shape how future growth would impact the look and feel of their town by proposing new bylaws. Unfortunately, contentious town meeting failures and mixed results drained their energy and dampened their spirits.

The board eventually decided to focus on a project that they could craft at their own pace over a number of years — their complex subdivision regulations, prescribing a new developments’ infrastructure requirements. They chipped away, chapter by chapter.

When they heard about other small towns adopting new development bylaws that incorporated both design flexibility for landowners and land conservation, planning board members realized that the solution seemed like a good next step, and the outreach done for previous efforts provided the insights necessary to move forward. With HCI’s guidance, talks ensued with local landowners, residents and town officials who viewed the new ideas favorably, and a final bylaw was eventually drafted with the help of community input. The flexible development bylaw not only passed at special town meeting with overwhelming support, the planning board members also received an ovation from an audience of town residents — a first in all their years of dedicated work.
3. SEIZE THE ENERGY OF THE MOMENT.

So, where do you begin? Just open the newspaper! Better yet, listen to your neighbors at the post office or transfer station. Small towns are always buzzing about one issue or another. Consider lending a hand with something that has already caught the public’s attention, or that represents a recognized community need. Building on existing momentum is always easier than starting from scratch.

4. LET THE LAND, AND YOUR TOWN, INSPIRE.

The Highlands’ natural and historical beauty moves artists to paint and poets to write and also inspires voters, donors and volunteers who wish to see them protected. Become fluent in the symbols that represent people’s connections to the land and your town. They may be unique places, events and community institutions, or enduring icons of life in rural New England, such as barns, stone walls or old cemeteries. These symbols have a voice of their own. Helping people hear them is the surest route to a motivated and well-informed community that is ready to act when needed.

Pumpkins Roll for Westhampton Library: Meeting a Need and Facing a Challenge

When an opportunity arose to provide a new, handicapped accessible home for the town library while also saving a historic parsonage and preserving land for a town common, a group of Westhampton citizens set out on a four year journey full of heartbreaking setbacks, triumphs and inspiring ingenuity that made a permanent impact on the town.

The Westhampton Library Project had the blessing of both the town government and the majority of Westhampton’s residents, but three times it fell just shy of the two thirds vote needed to raise funds via taxes. Undeterred, library supporters harnessed the creativity and positive energy of the community. They applied for grants, including a small grant from HCI, and developed a series of fundraisers that embodied the spirit of the town and the project — a town fair with a now famous pumpkin roll, a reading marathon, and even a gathering of decorated, pink, plastic flamingoes! All told, a town of 1,700 people was able to raise the unthinkable amount of over $650,000, which was then matched by a state grant. The library and community center are now symbols of perseverance, interwoven beautifully into the fabric of town life.

Priceless Connections with Neighbors and Nature

Across the Highlands, residents are finding new reasons to go outside to gather, learn, or exercise.

Awareness-raising outdoor walks were always popular and important HCI events. Small grants from HCI and local cultural councils have allowed other groups to spread publicity or hire interpretive guides for similar excursions. The Huntington Conservation Commission offering on-site workshops on invasive species and the Ashfield Historic Society raising funds by offering tours of local barns using HCI’s barn booklet as a guide, are excellent examples.

Some of the most successful outdoor gatherings have no greater purpose than pure enjoyment and fostering camaraderie. Thanks to blogs, flyers and word of mouth, a volunteer-led, post-Thanksgiving family walk/run at the Chesterfield Gorge has turned into the annual Gorge après Gorge, drawing greater numbers every year for the simple purpose of getting the heart rate up in good company at a beautiful location.
5. TALK TO YOUR NEIGHBORS AND BUILD PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS.

Social capital is your bank account of personal connections, from acquaintances to family members. Relationships are both the glue and the energy in any community and research shows that people tend to help, care about and listen to those that they know.

So say “hello” to your neighbors. Invite them over for dinner. Not only make your town stronger and you more knowledgeable, they will also prove helpful if you need to pass along information or build support for an important effort in the future.

Neighbor to Neighbor: Small Town Networks Prove to be Cutting Edge

When UMass Extension and HCI were searching for the best way to provide good information to Highland landowners about their conservation options, the organizations sought out socially-connected community members willing to serve as informational resources for their friends, family and neighbors. The Neighbor Conservation Network relies on peer-to-peer, word of mouth communication, something abundant in the Highlands and highly influential the world over. Hopefully, those looking to conserve their land, or keep it in the family, will soon find information as easily as those looking for a realtor or land developer. Check it out at www.masswoods.net/ncn.

The Town of Conway also relied on the power of neighborly connections when taking on the often contentious prospect of zoning bylaw revisions. Several years ago, Conway’s Ad Hoc Zoning Bylaw Committee decided to seek feedback to help direct new zoning bylaws by organizing five neighborhood meetings in private homes in different neighborhoods across town. The meetings drew a total of 80 people, provided good candid responses, strengthened neighborhood ties, and later served as a template for input on the Community Preservation Act which was successfully adopted by the town.
6. REACH ACROSS BOUNDARIES.
Most issues naturally spread across towns, organizations and personal circumstances. With rural communities facing many similar questions, and sharing natural resources such as rivers, trails and forests, there can be significant benefits from trading ideas or even banding together. Town boards and officials, both within towns and in neighboring jurisdictions, are clear candidates for problem-solving collaborations. Residents also can do well by looking beyond their property lines and social circles. Varied groups like snowmobile riders, hunters and other conservationists regularly see eye-to-eye and can make great partners, if one is willing to take the chance by reaching out to new allies and keeping an open mind.

Old Friends Form New Land Conservation Partnership

The Trustees of Reservations and Hilltown Land Trust (HLT) have been conserving land in western Massachusetts for decades. In its 26 years as a local, volunteer-run land trust, HLT built both a trusted reputation and an impressive record of protecting and stewarding land in the Hilltowns. The Trustees, the oldest statewide conservation organization in the U.S, opened the first of its 13 properties in the Highlands region in 1906 and has often collaborated with local groups on land protection projects, and helped spread the word about conservation through HCI.

With HLT’s capacity stretched by growing requests and permanent stewardship responsibilities for conserved properties, its volunteer board made a bold decision to break with tradition by reaching out and formally affiliating HLT with The Trustees. The proudly independent volunteers saw that times had changed. Land conservation had become more professional, with increased demand for expertise to manage finances, regulatory requirements and workload. The Trustees could offer those services and provide long term stability, while allowing HLT to keep its identity and the flexibility required to respond to local needs. HLT’s supporters responded by raising funds to hire an executive director, which provides The Trustees with a stronger presence in an important region.
7. TAP LOCAL TALENT AND RESOURCES.
Creativity, thriftiness and self-reliance are the hallmarks and heritage of rural populations. These attributes lead to a remarkably diverse set of knowledge and skills, well-honed to solving the problems and realizing the opportunities of small town life.

From old-timers to newcomers, you won’t have to look far to find someone who can lend a hand with just about any cause. Need to see an example of sustainable forestry? Would an exhibit by local artists be the perfect fundraiser for your organization? Does your website need some help from a tech savvy volunteer? In most cases, there’s no need to outsource. Talent is all around you!

In Ashfield, You Can Get There from Here

The volunteers at Ashfield Trails have a strong sense of direction. From the beginning, the collection of outdoor enthusiasts decided to forgo the bureaucracy of forming its own official town committee or nonprofit organization in favor of getting down to the business of building trails. Working in partnership with willing landowners and nonprofits like The Trustees of Reservations, Ashfield Trails members bring an impressive array of skills to bear on projects, including: a broad knowledge of local lands, good relationships with landowners and the ability to negotiate, the physical capability to scout and build trails for various purposes, and with HCI small grant assistance, the foresight to garner publicity and build community support.

All together, group members have partnered to build and maintain over 10 miles of new trails, often linking existing networks and routes, such as the connection between The Trustees’ Bullitt and Chapel Brook Reservations and the DAR State Forest. The projects are part of an ambitious vision by Ashfield Trails to connect the entire town of Ashfield with a network of trails.
8. RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIVATE LANDOWNERS.

The decisions of private landowners shape the look and feel of the Highlands, the largest, contiguous forest in southern New England. Ordinary families and individuals now own roughly three quarters of Massachusetts’ forests. Stewardship is entrusted to them, as the land is theirs to conserve, farm, harvest timber, maintain trails, care for historic structures or subdivide and sell as house lots.

Owning a large tract of land entails many tough financial, personal and family decisions. And with the average age of forest landowners in the Commonwealth now over 60 years old, those decisions are rising in number and importance. Though we may not see the lines change on the ground, as land gets passed on and split into smaller and smaller parcels, conserving it or conducting active forestry both become exponentially harder. The ecology, aesthetics and natural resource-based economy of our region’s forest need large, unfragmented parcels. Respect the circumstances of landowners, help them make informed decisions, and do what you can to ease their experience in stewarding the land that defines the Highlands.

9. VALUE VOLUNTEERS.

Have you thanked your local town board member lately? Aside from a few paid employees, volunteers keep things running and moving forward in rural towns — not the least of which is town government.

Volunteers are people too. Their time, their ability, and their patience are not in limitless supply. If you are a volunteer, you have our heartfelt thanks! If you rely on volunteers, remember that they need to feel supported and appreciated. Listen to feedback. Learn what volunteers find enjoyable or fulfilling about their involvement, and maximize those experiences when you can. Remember, if something needs to be done in the Highlands, volunteers are the best, and possibly only option. Don’t take them for granted.

Coordinating to Tackle Invasive Species

Unlike humans, with our borders and property lines, plants don’t recognize boundaries. That’s a particular problem when invasive plants threaten to undermine an area’s healthy habitats — and one that requires multiple organizations and property owners to work together toward a solution. The Westfield Invasive Species Partnership (WISP) started when The Trustees of Reservation’s ecologist Julie Richburg reached out to colleagues who she knew shared her concern about the spread of invasive species. The partnership now includes Massachusetts Audubon, the Nature Conservancy, the Westfield River Wild and Scenic Advisory Committee, the New England Wildflower Society, Westfield State University, Hilltown Land Trust, and the Trustees of Reservations, all collaborating to address the threats invasive plants pose to our native habitats.

WISP’s Landowner’s Guide to Invasive Plant Management gives landowners guidance in prioritizing and tackling invasive removal projects, because picking the right treatment for the right plant will save money and many hours of hard work. Also, thanks to a new application called Outsmart Invasives, anyone with a smartphone or a digital camera and access to the internet can help researchers identify new outbreaks of invasive plants and insects before they spread throughout the Highlands.
10. KNOW HOW THE LAND WORKS.
Can you look at the woods and read what you see? Every acre of undeveloped land in the Highlands serves a function. Knowing what they are can help determine the land that needs the most protection, and what human practices residents can support to keep the Highlands looking rural.

Much of the Highlands’ land has been managed by people for centuries. Today, economic activities such as haying fields, growing vegetables, producing maple syrup and harvesting timber, along with other carefully planned stewardship practices to eradicate invasive plants and encourage wildlife habitat, play critical roles in maintaining the region’s signature rural look and outdoor resources. Both managed and unmanaged land support functions that benefit everyone, from producing clean air and filtering water, to providing recreational opportunities, habitat for endangered species and carbon sequestration to combat climate change.

Knowing and respecting all the functions and values of the land is key to acting appropriately and arguing persuasively on their behalf.

11. UNDERSTAND THE IMPACTS OF YOUR TOWN’S ZONING.
Zoning bylaws guide a town’s future development. Unfortunately, most pay little respect to the past development patterns and land uses that shaped rural towns into what they are today.

The classic, New England small towns of the Highlands developed over time with little planning, guided instead by common sense, local community needs and the limits of the day’s technology. Contemporary pressures on rural lands are different today. Fewer people make their living from agriculture or forestry on large properties. Residents are not limited by their distance from town centers. And technological innovations are reducing the challenges posed by on-site building conditions, making development possible on more land. Add cookie-cutter zoning laws that prescribe one or two acre housing lots along public roads, regardless of whether a property is in a town center or in the woods, and Highlands towns face the real prospect of becoming more suburban than rural in the future — one lot at a time.

If Highland residents truly wish to preserve and replicate the best aspects of their towns, zoning and subdivision bylaws must be changed to allow more flexibility and consideration for local conditions and needs. Since zoning bylaw changes require a two thirds majority at town meetings, advocates for continuing the Highlands’ rural heritage have their work cut out for them.
12. GOOD IDEAS DON’T SELL THEMSELVES: COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS ARE CRITICAL.

“Campaigning” is not a bad word when you believe in what you’re saying.

If you want your ideas or passions to flourish, people need to hear about them, understand them, and most importantly, to feel moved. These are not necessarily difficult tasks to accomplish, but they could very well challenge your own preconceptions and natural patterns of communicating and persuading others.

“Why should they care?” Think objectively about what really matters in your fellow residents’ daily lives and choose the two or three most compelling reasons for why they support your point of view. To illustrate those points, craft them into a story that is relatable and compelling, whether that story is a realistic hypothetical, or a true example involving local people or communities. And if your ideas face opposition and community debate, don’t get pulled into the weeds. Numbers, specifics and rebuttals have their place, but always return to your “frame” — those two or three points that you believe should define the issue in peoples’ minds.

Everyone loves a good story, and people living and working in the Highlands have good stories to tell. Find yours and tell it to everyone who will listen.

Presenting the CPA

The Community Preservation Act is a compelling story. For years, projects close to the heart and soul of towns around Massachusetts were pushed aside due to lack of funding. Town halls and historic cemeteries crumbled. Playing fields fell into disrepair. Communities could not save iconic farms and woodlands, or provide affordable housing to the newly-independent children or older generations of local families. Eventually, residents who held those causes dear fought for a state law that could help, and they won.

Residents seeking its local adoption in the towns of Conway, Goshen, Granville and Becket knew that only an engaging narrative would rally the support of town residents and counter opponents who portrayed the law as just another tax.

CPA supporters did not need to buy TV time or fancy advertisements. With HCI’s help, they posted simple displays in public places, and called or visited their friends and neighbors. They talked about the very specific needs of their towns that had been neglected over the years. And they explained how the CPA offered communities a dedicated funding source, local control, flexibility in decision making, and a very fair fee structure that took into account an individual’s personal circumstances. Everyday citizens breathed life into jargon and legalese. And when the votes were tallied, they ensured the proud stories of their towns would continue.
A NETWORK OF FRIENDS

Between the land and its people, the Highland communities are built on very firm ground. Nurturing the deep-rooted connections between people and land, fortifying ties within our communities, and maintaining the ecological bonds that allow land to function, will be the cornerstones for a vibrant and healthy region for years to come.

HCI is proud to have played a part in building enthusiasm, and a network of people who care, in the Highlands. There will always be people working to protect this special place, and they are there to lend a hand if you need them.

MANY OF HCI’S PUBLICATIONS REMAIN ONLINE AT WWW.HIGHLANDCOMMUNITIES.ORG

Your Land, Your Legacy: Deciding the Future of Your Land to Meet the Needs of You and Your Family

Chapter 61B Open Space and Recreational Land: Current Use Tax Program

Your Land, Your Financial Choices: Running the Numbers on Forest Conservation Tools

Your Land, Your Choices: A Landowners’ Guide to Critical Decisions in Land Management and Protection

Land Conservation Options Edited by Wesley T. Ward

Barns in the Highland Communities by Bonnie Parsons

Illustrated Commentary on Updating Subdivision Regulations in Massachusetts by Wayne Feiden, AICP; illustrated by Dodson Associates, Ltd

Building Your Highlands Home: A Guidebook for Homebuilders in the Highlands Region of Western Massachusetts by Mollie Babize; illustrated by Walter Cudnohufsky

Architecture in the Highland Communities by Bonnie Parsons

Discontinuing Town and Country Roads by Lynn Rubenstein and Alexandra Dawson

ANRs and Ancient Ways by Alexandra Dawson

A Landowner’s Guide to Invasive Plant Management

The CPA at Work in Small Towns

OTHER IMPORTANT ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO HELP

Berkshire Environmental Action Team | www.thebeatnews.org
Berkshire Natural Resource Council | www.bnrc.net
Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture | buylocalfood.org
Community Preservation Coalition | www.communitypreservation.org
Earth Thrives- Transition Towns | www.earththrives.com/transitiontowns
Franklin Land Trust | www.franklinlandtrust.org
Hilltown Families | www.hilltownfamilies.org
Hilltown Land Trust | hilltown-land-trust.org
The Trustees of Reservations | www.thetrustees.org

UMass Amherst:

Conservation Assessment & Prioritization System (CAPS Maps) | www.umasscaps.org
MassAcorn Cooperative Resource Network | massacorn.net
MassWoods Forest Conservation Program | masswoods.net
Massachusetts Citizen Planner Training Collaborative | www.umass.edu/masscptc

Westfield River Watershed Invasive Species Partnership | www.facebook.com/WestfieldRiverWatershedInvasiveSpeciesPartnership
Westfield River Wild & Scenic Advisory Committee | www.westfieldriverwildscenic.org