

↑ ATTRACTING NEW RESIDENTS

A Strategy for the Adirondack Park
and its Communities

Year Two Progress Report – Summer 2023



Capacity Building and Direct Action Create Momentum

Attracting young people to the Adirondacks is an economic and community imperative. The shortage of workers is real. Businesses limit hours due to fewer staff. Towns, non-profits, hospitals, and schools experience worker shortages on a regular basis, reducing the ability of communities and institutions to provide essential services. This crisis didn't emerge overnight; it grew from the slow erosion of economic stability and population.

Two years ago, the Northern Forest Center launched the [*Attracting New Residents Strategy*](#), a comprehensive approach for rural communities to assess their assets, identify areas needing investment, and take action following a step-by-step guide for implementation.

We then put the strategy into action, facilitating affinity groups, webinars, and more, to share ideas and show what is possible. Local community leaders came forth to implement the strategy and asked for our support to identify priority projects that would catalyze change. We also began raising capital, both

investment and philanthropic, to provide ready financing for these projects.

The response has been tremendous, with hundreds of Adirondack stakeholders participating. The demographic emergency shifted from the back burner to the front, with a shared sense of urgency and the need for coordinated and integrated approaches to help our communities better compete for young people. Local media publicized successful projects. Policy makers pursued legislation and resources to address infrastructure issues. New projects evolved to serve residents first, and visitors second. A new era of community and economic development is underway to attract and retain young people.

The following pages highlight activities and achievements from the past year. We are simultaneously building the region's capacity and knowledge to do more collectively and taking direct action by developing housing units, supporting recreation projects, and partnering directly with multiple towns. We are committed to the long-term success of the [*Attracting New Residents Strategy*](#) and to proving that the investments we're making now will result in a discernible change by 2030.

We deeply appreciate our partnership and invite you to share your successes and ideas. Thank you for your support and all you do!

The Center's Adirondack Team,

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It's Easy to Love the Adirondacks, but Hard to Find a Home

Harry Caldwell, 31, grew up catching frogs, climbing trees, and boating in the Lake George community of Bolton Landing. "I loved every part of it – boating on the lake and skating on black ice," said Harry.

Meanwhile, Leah Comerford, 35, was exploring the forest and creek in her backyard in the suburbs of Buffalo. "I loved living there, but my favorite week of every summer was the one my family spent in a boat house on Saranac Lake."

"I've wanted to live up here all my life," said Leah. "All my best memories are from the Adirondacks: sunsets on the water, time with family, hiking. I did some soul searching and realized I wanted to be in the mountains. I'm so thrilled to find a job up here that I'm suited to, with a living wage." When her initial career plans were thwarted, Leah turned to her love of horticulture and ran her own business for eight years. She now manages the landscaping department at East Branch Organics in Keene.

Harry, who teaches art to K – 12 students at Minerva Central School, found his home through relationships he forged while doing an art residency at Craigardan in Elizabethtown. "People invited me to go skiing at night, to go hiking. One new friend told me I needed a mountain bike and introduced me to the strong biking community here," he said.

"The quality of the people and their interests drew me to the area," said Harry.

"Not just adventure sports, but art, gardening, self-sufficiency. It's really nice to have a community of people you can rely on."

For both of them, finding a place to live was difficult and included months of hopping between AirBnBs, inns, and friends' houses. "You can't just search online for housing," said Harry. "It's all word of mouth. I don't think there's a studio apartment in E'town."

"You really need to be motivated to search things out," said Leah. "It's so hard unless you know people who can tap into local knowledge."

"Houses are extremely expensive, with people buying above asking price because of COVID," said Harry. "I had a friend who wanted to sell a semi-unfinished house. That was the only way I could afford it. I really lucked out -- the house wasn't even on the market. That friend was one I met on my first night-time ski trip here."

"I think it's a real benefit having the Center working in the community, trying to create more housing that fits in line with the vibe of the place," said Harry. "It's got to be right for the whole community."

"So many young people would like to live here, and they would really contribute to the community," said Leah. "We need housing that is a stepping stone – available and affordable. That's really important. If we want new people to live here and fill jobs in our community, they need places to live."



"If we want new people to fill jobs in our community, they need places to live."

**– Leah Comerford,
Elizabethtown resident**



Activities & Accomplishments

Addressing Our Regional Housing Crisis

The need for more quality housing in our communities is a top priority in all discussions about attracting and retaining young people. Builders have long focused on high-end homes; short-term rentals compete for existing housing stock; and a limited workforce restricts the region's capacity to build more homes. We're addressing these challenges by:

Directly investing in housing projects and community revitalization:

We have multiple projects in development to create quality attainable housing that is accessible to healthcare, education, non-profit, and hospitality workers while also supporting downtown revitalization, historic preservation, and streetscape enhancement efforts. Financing for these projects is in part from the Center's impact investment Northern Forest Fund:

- **Tupper Lake:** we purchased two properties on Park Street and are in the design phase for a 9+ unit project, partially funded by the successful Downtown Revitalization Initiative bid.
- **Elizabethtown:** we are conducting due diligence on two properties: a historic home that has promise for renovation into 4+ units and a vacant lot with potential for a new mixed-use building in the heart of the community.
- **Keene:** we continue active conversations to identify an appropriate property for cluster development of up to 8 units.

Supporting communities grappling with this issue:

- In collaboration with Adirondack Foundation, we authored *A Place to Start*, a toolkit cataloging innovative housing projects and approaches underway across the region to support community leaders in addressing local housing needs.
- We conducted research into the impacts of short-term rentals on the local housing market, and authored a report to share examples of

how municipalities can better understand and address the issue, particularly the problematic growth of short-term rentals.

- We supported communities on potential projects and municipal policies affecting housing, helping, for example, the Keene Town Housing Task Force to develop an RFP to identify potential developers for projects.

Convening regional conversations and sharing knowledge:

- We hosted nearly a dozen virtual discussions focused on housing and downtown revitalization. Over 350 people have participated, including town supervisors, local planning officials, housing developers, non-profit leaders, business owners, and residents from dozens of towns with topics spanning building rehabilitation, housing cooperatives, municipal-led development, land banks, short-term rentals, and more.

Advancing community-based recreation initiatives

Investments in recreation have traditionally been made with visitors in mind. While this approach has supported the recreation economy, it has largely ignored the community's ability to access outdoor recreation and capitalize on it as an attractor for new residents.



Activities & Accomplishments

We have continued to strengthen community-based recreation by providing grants and assistance to local organizations and projects through our Adirondack Community Recreation Alliance, a collaborative of stakeholders advocating a new approach to the recreation economy. Since the inception of the Alliance, we have invested more than \$60,000 in recreation projects benefiting almost 20 communities around the Adirondacks, providing mountain bikes for kids, new trails and trail stewardship, tool libraries, and upgrades to municipal skating rinks. [More online!](#)

Recognizing the growing popularity of mountain biking – and the need to better share information across the region – we have begun convening representatives from more than a dozen mountain bike networks to fuel regional collaboration, inspiration, and adoption of programs like the Center’s [Ride with Gratitude](#) stewardship campaign.

Supporting communities with direct strategy implementation

We continue to bring capacity – our staff time and additional resources – to provide project management, facilitation, and grant writing to help advance community projects. These include:

- Writing state, federal, and foundation grant applications that would inject funds directly into local revitalization projects, including downtown revitalization, historic preservation, enhancements at key institutions, and recreational connectivity.
- Reigniting, via facilitation, a long-standing effort to fund a new municipal sewer system in Elizabethtown to enable new housing, serve existing residents, allow business growth, and attract new families.

- Providing leadership in Tupper Lake to ensure the proposed rail trail improvements most effectively serve the community.
- Spurring a tri-town branding effort that will create a strong identity for the towns of Johnsbury, Chester, and Horicon to market their communities and develop trail and wayfinding signage.

These projects have been identified and championed by local perspectives, we’re providing an accelerant to help build momentum and success, and helping to focus projects through the lens of attracting and retaining younger residents.

Building community among young professionals

Recognizing that building a sense of welcome and community is important to new and prospective young residents, we host events to bring together young professionals throughout the region. Recent events have included skiing, trivia, bowling, and events in collaboration with other regional non-profits like a day at the Wild Center and happy hours at the Adirondack Land Trust. We have received positive feedback from attendees, many of whom remark on how difficult it can be to meet people when new to the region.



The Northern Forest Center is a regional innovation and investment partner creating rural vibrancy by connecting people, economy, and the forested landscape. We contribute ideas, support, and expertise to people strengthening economic opportunity and environmental resiliency across Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York.

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