

LIVE THE NEW FOREST FUTURE

# Northern Forest Center

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## Community Case Study: Chester, New York

Chester, New York, was once a major crossroads with ample local industry and farming. But like many Northern Forest towns, Chester needed to reinvent itself when transportation and economic trends changed and drew commerce away. Today 3,000 year-round residents call Chester home, and hundreds of second-home owners come every year to enjoy this southeastern Adirondack community's natural beauty as well. Although the town has managed to retain the key elements of a successful small town – a grocery store, a handful of restaurants, numerous recreation opportunities, access to the interstate, and residents who want to see good things happen rising – housing prices are creating hardships. Downtown stores struggle to stay open, and families have increasing difficulty finding what they need to make a life in Chester.

With Chester's future always on his mind, Town Supervisor Craig Leggett has been an avid supporter of the Northern Forest Center and the approach detailed in its [Attracting New Residents Strategy](#) – essentially, that communities must focus on creating the conditions needed to attract and retain young people if they are to thrive. Given Craig's enthusiasm, Chester emerged as a natural community in which to explore how adding capacity – in the form of assistance from Adam Bailey, the Center's Adirondack program manager – could help implement the strategy.



Downtown Chester, New York.

Chester has successfully implemented transformational changes in recent years, including expanded recreational trails and reopening the local theater. Additional capacity is critical to sustain momentum and to support forward-thinking towns, like Chester, that want to take on new projects. The time of even the most ambitious town supervisors can be quickly consumed by culvert washouts, budgets, and basic community needs. Similarly, hard-working local volunteers have the best interests of their neighbors in mind, but time and resources can be a barrier to implementing major initiatives.

The Center provides fundamental support for important community projects that for one reason or another have had difficulty moving toward implementation. Adam and his counterparts in other Northern Forest communities have researched funding opportunities, written grant proposals, helped keep projects on schedule, and communicated with dozens of partners to keep projects moving.



Chestertown farmers market.

It's critical that town residents direct the Center's work, not vice versa. In this spirit, Adam has convened an advisory group for 18 months. In addition to Craig, the group's members are engaged residents who often wear two or more hats each- including a business owner who is a trail builder, a tech worker who is a theater owner, and a real estate agent raising a family. This group meets regularly to identify community priorities and how the Center can help connect the town with available resources and manage special projects. The work is informed in part by results from the community self-assessment included in the Attracting New Residents strategy.

Projects the group has been working on include:

- » Establishing a multi-use trail to connect the local recreation area to the downtown, with the eventual goal of expanding the trail to adjacent communities.
- » Designating a historic district to provide funding opportunities to downtown property owners to rehabilitate buildings.
- » Expanding the community forest and improving its connections to the downtown for pedestrians.
- » Funding and developing a regional branding campaign to elevate the presence of the community to visitors and potential residents.
- » Ongoing investigation of downtown revitalization opportunities.

The work in Chester is still in beginning stages, but the advisory group has laid substantial groundwork for future success. The Center looks forward to continuing its work here and demonstrating how third-party time and attention can help other rural communities in their quest to attract and retain the next generation of Northern Forest residents.

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Town Supervisor Craig Leggett meets with NYS Officials in Chester to discuss funding opportunities.

For more information on our programming in Chester, New York, contact Adam Bailey, Adirondack Program Manager, [abailey@northernforest.org](mailto:abailey@northernforest.org).