



The New Forest Future

The Northern Forest Center seeks to build a **New Forest Future** – creating vibrancy and prosperity within a context of economic and industry changes, pandemic-triggered shifts, and climate change. In September 2021, we gathered community development experts working at different scales to discuss their interpretations of the New Forest Future and set the stage for future topics in the “Building the New Forest Future” webinar series.

Panelists included **Janet Topolsky**, executive director of the **Community Strategies Group at the Aspen Institute** (now retired); **Rob Riley**, president of the **Northern Forest Center**; and **Gillian Sewake**, executive director of **Discover St. Johnsbury**, the St. Johnsbury (VT) Chamber of Commerce.

The Northern Forest is a place with tremendous inherent assets, our panelists agreed, including deeply committed and engaged longtime residents. But narratives about the region’s communities are not always so positive, the communities themselves are not always welcoming to newcomers, and the vital 25- to 44-year-old demographic is underrepresented.

Gillian shared that it’s taken years to overcome negative narratives about St. Johnsbury, and that finally people other than formal town leaders are stepping up:

“Entrepreneurs are moving in, a cooperative group is renovating a prominent downtown building, a group of friends took a chance on the downtown to build a hip taproom. These things have all brought hope and investment. So, now we are in this great place of having a lot of opportunities from the creative and recreation sectors to attract new residents and tourists.”

Gillian Sewake, Executive Director of Discover St. Johnsbury



Panelists recommend that communities:

- Shift the perceptions about our communities through the stories we tell ourselves: positive messaging matters! Janet noted that **“There is innovation in rural America all across the country; it’s just invisible to most people.”**
- **Be open and welcoming and create a sense of belonging for new groups** – while intentionally including longtime residents from all socioeconomic strata in these conversations.
- **Cultivate leaders.** Our communities will be strongest when we don’t rely on a single individual, group, or sector for leadership. Entrepreneurs and others have a real opportunity to catalyze community development.
- **Invest in amenities that are attractive to younger people**, including broadband, jobs and careers, quality attainable housing, recreational amenities, and third spaces such as cafes and breweries.
- **Build all forms of community capital – natural, financial, social, and cultural** – not narrowly focusing on one at the expense of the others. Overreliance on outdoor recreation, for example, has been a tension point in some communities. As Rob said, “We need to be careful about how successful we are, and under whose framework, and what the impact is on our landscape.”

Celebrating success is another critical component of building a **New Forest Future**. Momentum can take many forms, from highly visible façade renovation projects to unseen but essential formation of a new workgroup to advance priority projects. “You can really build energy if people come together and start taking small steps where they see success,” said Janet. “It helps lead to larger steps and taking bigger risks.”

In subsequent webinars, and captured in other Community Learning Briefs, community leaders share what strategies they’ve used to build more specific components of the **New Forest Future**. All content is available [here](#) for review.

Resources:

- [Webinar Recording](#)
- [Attracting New Residents to the Adirondacks strategy](#)
- [Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America’s Rural Innovation Infrastructure](#)
- [St. Johnsbury Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group](#)
- [Northern Forest Center](#)



The Community Learning Briefs summarize the Northern Forest Center’s 2021-2023 “Building the New Forest Future” webinar series. The introductory New Forest Future webinar and others in this series are available [here](#). This project has been supported in part by USDA Rural Development.