



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.



The Town to Trail Connection

The town-to-trail connection is more than just providing recreational amenities to residents and visitors – it’s also about building a community culture that’s grounded in its natural environment. The Northern Forest Center spoke with three experts in November 2021 about their experience integrating recreation into community.

Lee Dassler leads [Western Foothills Land Trust](#) in Norway, Maine, which aims to connect one of its properties directly to the quaint Norway downtown. In addition to that physical connection, the land trust offers 70 pairs of skis and boots for town residents and hosts community-centered races and festivals on its Nordic ski trails throughout the winter – cultivating personal connection between community members and the land.

Jason Hunter, with [Coös Cycling Club](#), Hub North, and Big Day Brewing in Gorham, New Hampshire, helped build 22 miles of multi-use, non-motorized trails in Gorham that now connect directly to the downtown brewery. The club maintains a fleet of 15 mountain bikes for use by local kids and supports the local high school mountain biking team.

Joe Fox – then recreation director for St. Johnsbury Academy and the [Town of St. Johnsbury](#), now the Center’s Outdoor Recreation manager – shared the town’s plans to take advantage of being at the terminus of the 93-mile, multi-purpose Lamoille Valley Rail Trail.

“Getting people in the forest, getting people in the woods, up on mountains is the best way to have them realize how important it is to our human souls to get outside and ground ourselves in nature.”

**Lee Dassler, Development Director,
Western Foothills Land Trust**



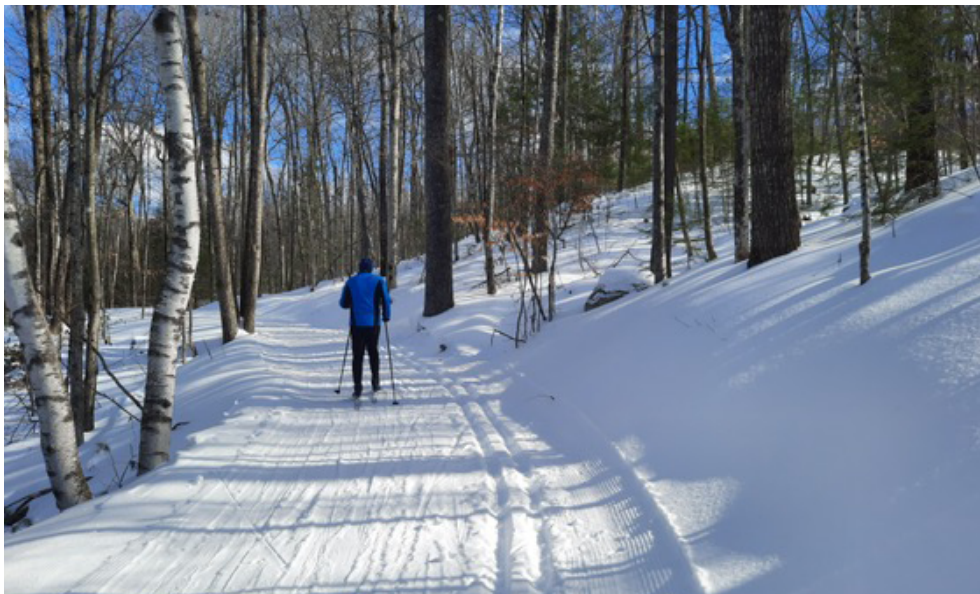
To establish a solid town to trail connection, these leaders recommend:

- Providing opportunities for residents to get involved – for example, through trail building or visioning sessions.
- Creating amenities that ensure safety while enhancing the experience for users, e.g., wayfinding signage, easy parking, year-round bathroom facilities, repair stations, etc.
- Minimizing the likelihood of user conflicts by installing proper signage and separating trail uses where possible.
- Educating kids about land stewardship from a young age.

These leaders also emphasized the importance of:

- **Building a culture of trust** so that residents recognize the opportunity that recreation provides to their town and champion and contribute to the progress of the project.
- **Partnering with local organizations** that can contribute resources, skills, and time that may be outside of the trail or lead organization’s scope.
- **Recognizing that building a town-to-trail connection is an iterative process** that will take time and resources and will likely hit hurdles along the way.
- **Talking with leaders** in other towns for insights and recommendations.

Establishing town-to-trail connections doesn’t happen overnight. It requires substantial resources and active participation by many residents and community leaders. It begins with setting a bold vision, then building strong relationships, thinking outside of the box, and committing to a process that will likely span years.



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Preparing for Broadband

Broadband is vital to people’s ability to live, work, and learn everywhere, including the Northern Forest. The COVID-19 pandemic elevated the need for broadband as more people work, learn, and access services remotely. However, the limited population density in the Northern Forest region drives up the cost of connecting homes and businesses, leaving many lacking adequate broadband connections.

The Northern Forest Center gathered four experts to discuss their approach to broadband expansion. Panelists included **Brad Roscoe** of [Chesterfield, NH](#), **Dave Wolf** of [Development Authority of the North Country](#), **Christa Shute** of [NEK Broadband](#), and **Mia Purcell** of [Community Concepts Finance Corporation](#).

“The fight for public infrastructure is worth it, and the people in your town are worth it. This is a long term investment...We have a moral obligation to find ways to use these funds to last us into the future.”
Christa Shute, Northeast Kingdom Broadband

This group explained that:

- New post-pandemic funding from federal and state sources has created opportunities to pursue expanded broadband infrastructure, but **funding will go only to communities that are ready.**
- Service providers can be a great place to start acquiring mapping and network data, but often they don’t have a good handle on their own service area or that of their competition. **Local work is necessary to fill those data gaps.**
- Wired connections are not the only technology available. Wireless solutions may be appropriate in some places.
- **Waiting for for-profit providers to fill the service gaps won’t always work.** Many are unable to expand their networks due to debt limitations. Also, the economics of rural network expansion provide little financial incentive for business. However, for-profit entities can provide important pieces of the puzzle such as accurate mapping or new trunk lines, and some towns can provide the necessary capital through municipal bonds, helping to bridge the gap and improve service.
- There is no one-size-fits-all solution, so it pays to **think creatively about how to fund, build, and maintain a network.**

“People need to be aggressive, progressive, active. Set goals, form a committee, get engaged, and take this on yourself.”
Mia Purcell, Community Concepts Finance Corporation

These community leaders agreed that good collaboration and data are critical to successfully expanding broadband coverage in the region. Their advice includes:

- **Organize a committee** as one of the first steps. This should include residents, town officials, business owners, and ideally representatives of local service providers.
- **Set clear goals** within the committee for what the ultimate outcome should be. Is it 100% coverage? Is it affordability for those with service? Is it a service to every student?
- **Raise broad public support** through ongoing community engagement, since there will likely need to be funding from the town. Host information sessions, post notices in the newspaper, share meeting minutes.
- **Map which companies are providing service and where**, both for convincing residents about the importance of the work but also to help tell the story to funders and prospective service providers.
- **Provide residents with a way to perform a speed test** on their existing service and have a way to collect that data.
- **Partner with existing service providers** where possible to improve service quickly.
- **Work regionally and across town lines** to increase efficiency and cut costs, especially in more rural areas with low population density.
- **Conduct “boots on the ground” work**, either through volunteers or paid contractors, to map out existing networks.

The leaders we spoke with made it clear that expanding broadband to rural corners of the region is a goal within reach – though it will take an especially high level of collaboration and tenacity to achieve.

For additional resources and information concerning broadband infrastructure throughout the region, see this helpful [Broadband Planning Resource Guide](#) developed by the Northern Forest Center.



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



Cultivating Welcoming Communities

“Welcoming communities” are those in which visitors, new residents, and longtime residents alike feel invited, accepted, and encouraged to contribute. The Northern Forest Center gathered three people with experience in helping create Welcoming Communities to talk about the process. **Nicky Hylton-Patterson**, then director of the [Adirondack Diversity Initiative](#) (ADI), **Maire Folan**, founder of the Northeast Kingdom chapter of the [Vermont Welcome Wagon Project](#), and **Amber Lambke**, founder and CEO of [Maine Grains](#) and a community leader in Skowhegan, shared their insights.

Fundamentally, welcoming communities are places where all people feel a sense of belonging, where they “see themselves in the community,” as Nicky said, and feel safe around people who are different. Yet raising questions about whether one’s community is welcoming to everyone can sometimes make longtime residents feel defensive. This group talked about the importance of honest conversations across different perspectives as a community begins to ask itself what needs to change to become more welcoming, or why being a welcoming community is important. They suggested that conversations between neighbors and “radical listening” – listening fully without judgment or interruption – are effective ways to address conflict.

Making people feel welcome is valuable for its own sake. But the group noted that because of out-migration, economic decline, and aging populations across the Northern Forest, communities that welcome new people may also have an economic advantage. Of course, retaining those new visitors or residents is just as important.

“We need to work hard at welcoming people in, so they feel like they fit in as quickly as possible. People who don’t feel like they fit in don’t stay.”

Amber Lambke, Founder and CEO of Maine Grains

The panel suggested that community members seeking to welcome newcomers should work with local employers and use word of mouth to know when new people have moved to a community.

Connecting people with volunteer opportunities, neighbors, and local events are tangible ways to get new people connected to the community early on. The group also encouraged people to use signs, banners, and other symbols to show that their community is welcoming, and to make use of bulletin boards (physical and virtual) to let people know what’s going on.

In whichever ways community members connect, it’s important that they seek to tell positive stories about the community and not fixate on a negative narrative or “language of despair,” as one panelist called it. This will help them think about the community as a place of connection, opportunity, and belonging.



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



Addressing Housing Gaps

The housing crisis in Northern Forest communities is well established. Numerous factors – from zoning to pandemic effects to short-term rentals to aging housing stock – have conspired to make it extremely difficult for low- to middle-income people to find a place to live in many Northern Forest towns. This reality is causing real harm to schools, hospitals, hospitality businesses, and other sectors needed to sustain vibrant communities.

The Northern Forest Center gathered four experts to discuss their approaches to this persistent problem. **They emphasized that there are many ways to address housing – from federal grant programs to local land use code to tax credits, among others – and communities need to consider all of them.** The programs they discussed reflect only a few of the options, but they’re intriguing:

- **Marla O’Byrne** of [Island Housing Trust](#) in Bar Harbor, Maine promotes viable, year-round island communities by advancing permanent workforce housing through a variety of tools. One of these is helping people make down payments, a barrier to homeownership for many.
- **Susan Bradford**’s program at [Community Concepts](#) brings people in western Maine together to build homes for six families at the same time, using USDA funds to subsidize the projects.
- **Dan Kiefer-Bach**, of [Living ADK](#), runs a program in the west-central Adirondacks that pays homeowners to encumber their property voluntarily, adding a restrictive covenant to deeds that requires anyone named by the deed to be a primary resident. This is a relatively simple process that can be replicated readily and applies to all future owners of the property.
- **Laurel Will**, the [Northern Forest Center](#)’s director of finance, explained how the Center is using impact investment funds (unsecured, low-interest loans) to finance property redevelopment and new construction in specific communities across the Northern Forest.

Northern Forest communities must find solutions to the housing crisis in order to thrive. As Marla said, “We need people to teach, to sell us groceries, to keep our communities resilient,” and if there’s no housing for these people, they simply can’t be there. The leaders we spoke with are all demonstrating that creative solutions are possible, durable, and worth the challenge.

For additional project examples and resources, see [A Place to Start: Adirondack Housing Resources](#). The Center developed this in partnership with the Adirondack Foundation and its relevance extends well beyond the Adirondacks.



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Recreation on Private Lands

The Northern Forest has a long history of large and small landowners opening their lands to the public for recreation, thanks to state laws releasing landowners from liability as long as they don't charge people to use their land. Access to private land is essential for the outdoor recreation economy in this region, and it comes with special challenges for recreation managers.

We gathered **Abby Long**, Executive Director of [Kingdom Trails Association](#), **Mike Morin**, former Northeast Regional director of [Access Fund](#), **Sean Ross**, managing director of [Lyme Timber Company](#), and **Josh Wilson**, then executive director of [Barkeater Trails Alliance](#), to share their insights on this topic.

The panel noted that the economic, cultural, and community benefits of recreation would not be possible without access to private lands. But poor behavior by users, conflict between user groups, increased traffic, and other issues dissuade some landowners from making their land available or causes them to revoke privileges. Thus, as Abby says, "Engagement and education on proper trail etiquette and holding users accountable is the one way we can continue to value and protect our private landowners."

Recreation managers often use programs such as [Leave No Trace](#), the Northern Forest Center's [Ride With Gratitude](#) campaign, [Hike Safe](#), or the Access Fund's [Climbers Pact](#) to reinforce messaging about land use etiquette. They also seek to minimize impact in any one area. As Mike said, "Being able to invest in new areas to spread people out is critical." Maintaining appropriate infrastructure, such as parking and bathrooms, and monitoring proper trail usage are also important to ensure that recreation development is sustainable for communities.

The panel offered advice to those seeking new access to land. "When it comes to approaching individual landowners," said Josh, "peer-to-peer contact can be really crucial for gaining permission." Sean reiterated, "Every landowner and every property are different, and you need to go in with a wide range of tools that you could present to a landowner." These tools may include conservation easements for an entire property or a corridor through it, eliminating the possibility that the land would be developed and lost to recreation forever.



“Educating the user side is probably one of the most important things we can do to continue to allow private landowners to let us use their property.”

Sean Ross, Managing Director of Lyme Timber Company

As of late 2023, liability law in New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine gives protection to landowners who open their land for public recreation only if they receive no financial compensation. While this statute gives strong protection to landowners, it can cause concerns or dissuade landowners who wish to be paid for access to their lands. Liability law differs from state to state; panelists shared the resources below for more information:

- [Overview of Recreation Use Statutes](#) in Northern Forest states from Cornell (2006)
- [Recreation Use Statutes](#) linked in all 50 states.

Additional recommendations from the panel include:

- Build relationships with landowners and community members. Listen to and address their concerns.
- Collaborate with other trail groups and encourage collaboration between user groups to strengthen advocacy and public messaging.
- Creative policy change at the state level could address different methods for compensating landowners while maintaining their liability protections.

Access to recreation on private land is a tremendous gift to Northern Forest residents and visitors. It’s our responsibility to respect the land and the private landowners generous enough to let us walk, bike, sled, ride, and hunt on their land.



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Building a Strong Workforce

Building a strong workforce is critical for the success of Northern Forest communities. A strong workforce not only helps businesses and institutions thrive, it also gives youth a sense of optimism about their career opportunities. Efforts to strengthen our workforce and invest in young people are especially important because of the region's aging population.

"For decades our largest export was our young population. They didn't feel like there was anything here for them."

Donna Wotton, Ticonderoga Revitalization Alliance

The Northern Forest Center convened a conversation of regional experts working to change this dynamic in their communities. Panelists included **Dave Harkless** of [Littleton Bike and Fitness](#), who teaches a bike mechanic training program in his local New Hampshire high school; **Levi Irish** of the [Cold Hollow Career Center](#), who runs training programs geared to forestry businesses in northwestern Vermont; **Donna Wotton** of [Ticonderoga Revitalization Alliance](#), which sees its role as an economic development nonprofit as extending into workforce development programming for local high school students; and **Korah Soll** of [Rural Aspirations](#), a Maine-based nonprofit that explores collaborative models to curriculum development and professional development for educators.

Levi was joined by several students present in her classroom during the discussion, and powerfully called out the importance of engaging all students.

"We are doing something wrong as educators if our system tells students how broken they are, not how brilliant they are."

Levi Irish, Cold Hollow Career Center

Each of the panelists described the programs that they're involved in to help students recognize their strengths, see meaningful career pathways, and connect to others in the community to broaden their vision of success.



“There’s a lot of students who want to stay here but don’t always see a positive economic future for their communities. Part of our job as an organization is to help them see that they are part of the future. If we can give them the skills to work through challenges, we are all working towards community vitality.”

Korah Soll, Rural Aspirations

Profound opportunities exist to address these challenges by:

- **Enhancing place-based education and strengthening experiential learning opportunities.** This can connect students to place, give them a sense of meaning in their education, and create social and economic links among businesses and students.
- **Engaging students at multiple points in their educational journeys** rather than waiting until 10th or 11th grade. For example, the students in Levi’s class described the pride they experienced when they hosted a site visit for second graders in their school to see their projects.
- **Recognizing that intelligence comes in many forms,** and that many rural students are hands-on learners who have been exposed to family businesses in agriculture, forestry or other applied fields. Applied curriculum analysis can yield opportunities to activate students of many backgrounds and enhance their connections to place.
- **Forming partnerships of many kinds.** These can involve traditional entities like teachers and guidance counselors, but can also leverage additional support, resources, and networks from nonprofits, local leaders, businesses, and local employees in diverse fields. Donna pointed out that these partnerships can grow organically: “Get something going and it snowballs! A lot of our employers have given us the best ideas. It has really swept through our community; they all see the benefits. Open the doors and invite everyone in!”
- **Redefining success.** Dave noted, “It’s not important to get every kid into a two-year or a four-year college. It’s important to get them to feel successful and smart.” Many employers are desperate for employees to fill well-paid, skilled positions that students can fill without incurring a lot of student loans.

Korah urged others to join in this effort and suggested a simple way to get going is to “start a conversation from a hopeful place.”

The impact of this work can be deeply powerful. Creating hope and optimism among students can in turn affect families, boost community morale, and lift up our collective sense of opportunity. Moreover, rooting education in place and turning education into an active process rather than a passive one puts youth in a position to gain agency over the future of not just their own trajectories, but the well-being of their communities.



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



Stewarding Community Forests

Community forests bring tremendous benefits to communities: permanent protection of open space and wildlife habitat, opportunities for experiential educational and recreation, income from timber harvests, and others. In November 2022, the Northern Forest Center gathered three experts to discuss the value of community-owned and -managed forests as well as tools and strategies for developing them.

Town-owned forests are a strong tradition in New England dating back to colonial settlement patterns. The Community Forest model was developed 20 years ago by the Northern Forest Center, Trust for Public Land, and Quebec Labrador Foundation. It expands and strengthens the town forest model by placing community participation at the heart of creating and managing the property.

Community Forests are owned by a municipality or by an interested non-profit in partnership with the municipality. A community working group sets priorities for management of the parcel so that benefits from the forest are tied to community values. The parcel is permanently protected, often through a conservation easement or deed restriction.

Community leaders **Gabe Perkins**, representing the 1,500-acre [Bethel Community Forest, Maine](#), **John Scarinza**, representing the 10,600-acre [Randolph Community Forest, New Hampshire](#), and **Ted Siegler**, representing the 1,700-acre [West Windsor Community Forest, Vermont](#), shared that persistence and community input are critical for successfully create a Community Forest.

They explained that each Community Forest is unique to its location and community, reflecting individual town priorities – whether conservation, water supply, recreation, habitat protection, education, investment, or other goals. Funding often comes from a combination of sources, including the U.S. Forest Service’s Forest Legacy and Community Forest programs, state programs, and local sources such as Land Use Change Tax, private campaigns, and timber harvest revenue.



“We believe that Community Forests are a valuable asset for rural communities, an old model that has significant relevance today.”

Julie Renaud Evans, Program Director, Northern Forest Center

Community Forests often take several years to develop and require buy-in from the community and continued input for long-term stewardship. The community leaders emphasized the importance of never accepting the word “no,” asking for help from others who have knowledge, experience, and resources to share, leaning on volunteers, and centering the existing community vision at the heart of the project.

Regardless of how a town decides to use its Community Forest – whether it prioritizes recreation, education, timber harvesting, wetland protection, or any other use – it’s heartening to see people come together around land protection and create an invaluable local asset.

Review the recording of the webinar to learn more. To learn more about Community Forests, visit the Northern Forest Center’s website.



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



Ensuring Climate Resilience

Climate resilient communities are less susceptible to damage from weather events and other changes associated with climate change. The Northern Forest Center gathered four leaders in this area whose stories made it clear that an “all the above” approach is necessary for communities to build their resilience.

The work these leaders are doing exemplified the breadth of tactics that organizations are employing to build climate resiliency. **Cameron Wake**, then with the [University of New Hampshire](#), set the context for this discussion by introducing what climate resiliency means at its core: bouncing back better by changing our infrastructure to better withstand climate impacts, ensuring energy resilience and cutting our dependence on fossil fuels, and thinking about healthy people and ecosystems.

Sam Evans-Brown of [Clean Energy New Hampshire](#) discussed policy and technology, including the importance of backup power to improve grid resilience. **Josh LaFountain** of [The Nature Conservancy](#) Adirondack Chapter shared his organization’s efforts to improve road-stream crossings and prevent development in floodplains. For **Scott Vlaun** and the [Center for an Ecology-Based Economy](#), climate resilience efforts include shifting power to youth and helping towns prepare resilience plans.

“People think about change in straight lines and linear progress. But what I’m seeing now is a change from a lot of work over 20 or 30 years that is now being adopted and exponentially increasing.”

Cameron Wake, Director, UNE North



Everyone in this group emphasized the fundamental need for community members to understand the need for planning and investment related to climate resilience. Some of the strategies they cited for accomplishing this include:

- **Connecting residents to elected officials** to help educate them and allow all voices to be heard. An example of this is [Clean Energy New Hampshire's Circuit Rider](#) program, which employs staff to work with municipalities, schools, and elected officials to implement energy efficiency and clean energy measures.
- **Providing data** to communities on the likely impacts of climate change.
- **Building the next generation of leaders** through education programs such as the [University of New Hampshire's Sustainability Fellowship](#) program, which connects undergraduate and graduate students with municipal, educational, corporate, and non-profit partners across New England for the summer to work on transformative sustainability projects.
- **Creating demonstration projects** such as electric vehicle installations that are highly visible while also sending a message about the importance of climate resilience.
- These leaders also affirmed **the importance of regional collaboration** that brings together increased funding, informed future planning, and added capacity that would not be available for towns working independently. Regional planning commissions, such as the Southern Maine Planning and Development Commission, is one avenue to leverage resources across towns and cities. Another approach is partnering with non-profits, municipalities, and universities to shift from theoretical to applied research in academia.
- Finally, the group reinforced **the importance of individual engagement in local government** – such as voting for candidates who prioritize climate action or advocating to town selectboards about the urgency of addressing climate resilience – to create more climate-resilient communities. Direct participation can help alleviate feelings of helplessness in the face of climate change and effect real change close to home.



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Encouraging Entrepreneurship

Small businesses bring multiple benefits to rural communities throughout the Northern Forest. They create good jobs, bolster the local economy, and can help create a sense of place – but it takes inspired and risk-tolerant entrepreneurs to make these important local establishments succeed.

The Northern Forest Center gathered four small business owners to share their experience and how communities can help support, attract, and retain local businesses. Panelists included **Tim Clough** of [Iron Furnace Brewery](#) in Franconia, NH; **Nathaniel Klein** of [Treeline Terrains](#) in Middlebury, VT; **James Munn** of [Black River Valley Natural](#) in Lyons Falls, NY; and **Beth Weisberger** of [Gneiss Spice](#) in Bethel, ME.



The four entrepreneurs agreed on the benefits of starting a business specifically in a rural location.

- **Starting a business is what may allow someone to move back home to raise a family.** Beth noted: “My business is online, I could really do it anywhere. But I feel very fortunate that I can do it in a place where I can get outside and really enjoy where I’m living.” No matter where you are geographically, having a unique product will make people curious.
- **People are really excited in a rural area to see new businesses start up and want to be supportive.** As Nathaniel said, “In a rural area, if a new restaurant opens up, it’s the talk of the town for a month. Everyone is thrilled to try it.”
- **Strong relationships with other local businesses can go a long way.** In rural areas, there is a sense of camaraderie rather than competition. James shared: “Having local competition does drive innovation and forces us to be more creative, which is not a bad thing. But we still help each other out.”
- **Being in a small town means that a business will be more successful if it is responsive to residents’ desires,** relies on local people and resources when possible, and gives back to the community in creative ways.
- **Supporting employees and creating a good work environment** is key to both retaining employees and attracting new ones, especially in a small town.

To overcome the challenges inherent to starting and operating small businesses, these entrepreneurs recommend:

- Connecting with regional and state-based business programs to access services such as business plan preparation and grant-writing support.
- Finding mentors who can provide guidance, perspectives, and resources as the business gets started. Chances are other businesses have struggled in the same way, so don't be afraid to ask for advice.
- Towns should work with new businesses directly or prepare how-to guides that help entrepreneurs navigate complicated process of legally establishing a business, like filing the right local and state permits, interpreting land use laws, and other local requirements they may need to comply with.

Running a business is never easy, but these four entrepreneurs made it clear that for the right person, it's worth the effort – both for the owner and the community.

“Launching a rural business checked all the boxes. It’s a way for us to get involved in our community, help the economics of the area by providing meaningful employment, and – unlike our previous careers – it’s we could do this as a family.”

James Munn, Black River Valley Natural

This positive mindset came through clearly from all the business owners we spoke with and is something that any aspiring entrepreneur – perhaps especially in the context of the Northern Forest – should heed.



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



Empowering Young Leaders

The success of rural communities depends on civic engagement, which most often comes from older residents. But since decisions made today will directly impact younger people for years to come, and since younger residents' current needs and priorities may differ from other residents' needs and priorities, it's important that rural communities find ways to encourage the next generation to lead – and for members of that generation to take the plunge.

Five younger leaders working in different leadership contexts shared their experiences in a recent panel discussion. They included **Tyler Adkins**, chair of the [Monson, ME](#) Select Board; **Jordanna Mallach**, supervisor of the [Town of Harrietstown, NY](#); **Chloe Maxmin**, [former Maine State senator](#), rural political organizer, and author of *Dirt Road Revival: How to Rebuild Rural Politics and Why Our Future Depends On It*; **Sam Mayne**, a Conservation Commission member in [Lancaster, NH](#); and **Michael Olio**, administrator of the [Town of Richford, VT](#).

The group agreed that young people often have no idea that there are local opportunities to get involved as leaders and committee members – it isn't something taught or shared in schools. They've observed that once people know that they can get involved, many do. The panelists said that young people like thinking about the potential of what could be and that their concerns about readiness and acceptance are not always warranted. "Show up at your town hall and ask whoever you can find there, how do I get involved with 'x' in my community," recommended Sam. "Everyone is so enthusiastic to get you involved – at least that's been my experience." As another leader said, "Just get involved! You're qualified!" Being a committed community resident is qualification enough for civic participation.

Young people may face different barriers to participation and leadership than older ones. Towns that want to encourage younger leadership should consider making changes such as providing childcare at meetings and offering remote participation options to accommodate challenging schedules and home demands. Increasing wages for paid positions would make local service a more viable career for young people to pursue.



“I love working at the local level. I have the opportunity to directly see the work that I’m doing, and to interact on a daily basis with the people that I’m impacting. That’s what keeps me motivated and keeps me engaged.”

Jordanna Mallach, Supervisor of Harrietstown, NY

Panelists said it’s important for younger leaders to acknowledge that they have a different perspective and experience than older people, and to gently point out that doing something differently doesn’t make it wrong. Building relationships with older generations and responding to their needs and interests – along with those of peers – is key. Leaders need to work on the issues and activities people care about and should make government as accessible as possible. As one panelist noted: “You can accomplish a lot in a short period of time at the local level when the community is engaged.”

The panelists underscored that by serving as community leader in any capacity, from volunteer board to paid management to elected official, young people can make a significant impact on how well their towns function now and how they will evolve into the future.



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