

Community Development In Rural Communities

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COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN A RURAL Community

The project which I have chosen is that of developing a effective and appropriate mechanism for introducing the concepts of Community Economic Development into a number of small Northern Rural New Hampshire communities which have had a long history of dreams deferred and dreams failed. At first I thought that the ideal method would be that of offering a series of courses through New Hampshire college's, LEARNING IN THE NORTH COUNTRY program in Littleton, NH.

However, I soon became dissuaded from this approach when I learned how colleges in general were viewed by residents of the North Country. when it come to dealing with money and any effort to produce money.

Thus I was left empty handed and instead of just plugging a concept into a program I had to do some real sole searching concerning a approach that would connect with these communities I felt very defeated and it was only early October of 1985

However, before exploring just what approach was developed, and how it was put into action feel, I that there needs to be some background information concerning the area in which I have been working the past sixteen months.

The area is commonly known as "The North Country", this comprises the three northern counties of New Hampshire and Vermont

.However, in Vermont these counties are affectionately known as the "North East Kingdom". In dubbing it such the famous senator from Vermont George Akin, was thinking of a dominion that had little interference from the outside world and which in large measure made it's own rules for carrying out its daily economic life.

The same, is more or less true for the New Hampshire side of the region also.

Except that on The New Hampshire side, the paper and pulp companies. held sway in setting the rules of the economic game along with a scattering of shoe factories and a odd woolen mill here and there.

Along with ^{the} above, lightly scattered among this heady brew of " progressive thinkers", were the hardest of hard scrabble hill farms.

One is never quite sure whether or not the existence of these farms is a testimonial to why farming is dying out, or to the need for increased mental health in the Rural areas of New England, whatever the score, they are and were in no way considered the mainstay of the economic structure of Northern New Hampshire of a hundred years ago or today save for an occasional Yankee Magazine cover to lure a few more New Yorkers and Bostoian^s up / to buy more played out land.

To fully appreciate the degree to which the area has declined and to what extent the former residents have been displaced ,one only need visit Lincoln,Woodstock and Bethlehem in order to see the transformation that is taking place with the aid of down country money, as well as totally different set of ideals as to what living in this part of the world is all about.

But there is another side to this story and it dates back to the mid nineteenth century when then Governor ~~F~~ of New Hampshire sold in 1867 172,000 acres of North Country wood land for \$25,000

To understand that the Northern part of New Hampshire unlike other parts of New England were developed from the start as Company towns and companies resources without being responsible to members of the community

. For it is only in this context that one can come to a full understanding of why present day Northern New Hampshire has little concern for those decedents of wood cutters who in turn were themselves newly landed immigrants from Europe.And why the new wave of entrepreneur's are considered the princes and all resources of the community are at their command.

(For further information on the pulp and paper industry see work by John McCarthy who has developed in conjunction with New Hampshire college's school of Human Service a slide tape documentary on the history as it unfolded in Berlin .,NH.)

It was during this period of a hundred years ago, when there were several thriving rail roads, scores of small bustling villages that had hundreds of bustling small scale business that ranged from tanning to iron making to piano making to furniture and machine making all up and down the several rivers that lattice the region

With each village harnessing the water for power to operate the mills and factories and manufacturing processes as well as to move much of the commerce.

For example there were no less than four full blown opera house one each in St. Johnsbury, Littleton, Lancaster as well as in Berlin.

There were brewers, wood workers, brick ovens and rail road workers as well as engineers to operate the trains. There were several large summer Hotels the largest being the MT. Washington /Bretton Woods complex.

Today, in this same state which is booming by all accounts, here in the North Country there is wide spread ~~un~~employment, as well as underemployment and the highest rate on alcohol abuse on a per capita basis to be found anywhere in the state. To this can be added an ever increasing amount of absentee landlords as well the continual outflow of business capital.

While the North Country is one the favorite places of the rich to come and play in both the winter and summer it also is one of the favorite place to dump and confine New Hampshire's forgotten peoples. This is, then New Hampshire's

Ghetto,with all the trappings of a ghetto;displacement,lack of power by the residents over those institutions which control and shape their lives from schools to Employment and the creation of jobs.

On the other hand there a relative few number of residents scattered throughout some of most beautiful landscape to be found in New England.

But what of economic empowerment? Can it be more than a head line in a text or a flash on a video tape of some far off Spanish town? Can it be made real for residents of desperate villages and small settlements fifty miles from a real town and twenty miles from the Canadian border?

Can in fact Community economic development be made to produce in the very environment which needs it most,i.e.a depressed and non empowered community?

That is the question which my explorations are designed to answer,however this answer may take anywhere from two to five years to effectively answer.

I do not, at this point in time have any clear cut answers,However what I do have is a set of experience which have meaning for a set of rural residents who have begun the long haul towards developing a framework in which they and other residents can begin to construct a set of economic ventures which offer mutual support and the hope of self sustaining economics that can begin to stabilize their lives here in Northern New Hampshire.

Thus I shall begin to describe how one effort has begun to build in a few Rural communities.

In late October of 1985 I was talking to two women from Colebrooke NH which is located in the extreme northern part of the state, they were telling me how their families were having a hard time staying on the land and how the farms had fallen on hard times, due to both the collapse of the milk market as well as the decline of the lumber operations because of the Canadian imports.

They talked about all the ventures that had been tried and how non had panned out, these ranged from small craft production efforts to wreath making.

About how the extension office had tried to save the farms and how several small business had been attempted and failed and how they just could not see what was going to happen now, or where the was any hope that they could continue to live in the communities where they had grown up, leave alone how their children were going to be able to begin their adult lives in these communities.

I suggested that we get together in a couple of weeks and see what the three of could do in the way of mapping out a action plan to at least draw some people together to explore these conditions.

In the following two weeks I bugged a number of people including Michael Swack and Ray Burton to pick their brains on what could be done.

Several suggestions were made on possible approaches and as the meeting date drew closes and closer, I got sweater and sweater palms on what would be a plan of action for even holding the meeting leave alone saving a town or exciting a community.

Then I got the ~~the~~ bright idea, that instead of having a whole predigested agenda for the three or four people who would be coming to the meeting, that instead I would lay back and see what they brought to the meeting.

The day of the meeting arrived and so did about six inches of snow, rain sleet and a good north wind thrown in ~~for~~ added measure, but behold so did the four ladies in a bright red four wheel drive truck arrive right on time, four pm.

We stand around ~~the~~ drinking coffee and the two ladies I had talked with introduced me to their two other friends that they had brought along.

We sat and we sat and not much was said. Then one of the new members of the group said, "We hear that you have a pot of money that can help us get along this winter. She continued, is it like WIC or Fuel assistance we got couple of years back?

I gently as possible tell them no it is not so that I have any money and that I don't know just where that idea came from.

That seem to break the ice for one of the other ladies then offer,well that is a relief ,there for a moment I thought you was going to sign us up for yet another program that was going to help us if only..... her voice trailed off in to whisper,if only .The third lady returned with her second cup of coffee and finished the first ladies sentence,.. if only we would get ten more people to say they needed the help or something like that.?

I chuckled saying" no I did not have any such program and that Learning IN The North Country as two of the ladies already knew was a adult college based program,and had nothing in the way of funds or ready made plans.

However, I suggested that we talk about what they thought might work in bringing some work and money back into their community.

At first they brought up all the old ideas of a factory,a big employer or if only the shoe or bobbin mill or the box factory would take hold again.

I then very gently asked what they thought would happen if one of them were to start business.

They stared at me as though I had slipped on the snow, that was still falling outside and in some way had injured my thinking ability.

But I came back at them with the same question,and on the third try one spoke up and said,you know no one has ever asked that question before.

Now I don't know if we could but you know just thinking that thought is a nice way of going at the problem. Let us just pretend for a spell and use the chalk board to see what we might do.

In the next forty or so minutes there tumbled out a host of ideas that for all I knew had been stored up for twenty years.

There was the idea of a doll factory, a wreath and christmas tree business, a landscaping business and a day care for elders. Then there was the idea of a farm camp and then there was the idea of canning food then selling and of raising turkeys and berries and the like.

When we looked up it was almost six and we all looked at each other with a great deal of surprise and wonderment at the conversation that had been taking place.

They had to go but they said that they would be in touch, I thought to myself or sure.

That was on a Thursday. On the following Tuesday I got a call from Irene who said could we meet a week from Wednesday, I said sure and asked about what. She said I got a couple of ideas, she didn't say anymore and hung up.

On Wednesday afternoon in early November Irene showed up with her husband, and two other people along with a room full of paper.

We sat down and she began right off saying that what her area needed was a place where people could make things that

could be sold in the resort areas which abound in this part of the state.

So I asked what type of things she had in mind and she told me crafts, jams, jellies etc.

I then asked her how she would go about marketing such, and she replied in her always straight forward manner, that she would just knock on doors..

We tossed that and several other ideas about and came to the conclusion that what we needed to do was to develop a long term plan for getting people interested in community based economic development, including effective marketing efforts for products and services that were to be produced locally..

We set yet another meeting date for early Jan. in the mean time Irene and others were going to see who else would be interested.

Jan. came and about ten people came to the meeting including a fellow named Carl Rod from Lancaster and another fellow from Berlin named John McCarthy. In later months these two and Irene would prove to be very valuable to the effort.

We meet and reviewed what had been discussed at the previous meetings. At some point in the meeting Carl suggested that what we needed was to build a organization that could gather information, meet with people and assist them in thinking through their ventures.

At this point I suggested that we might want to look at a video of what a group in Spain had accomplished they were

lukewarm to the idea but said that it at least would provided a focus for the next meeting in Early February. So we set the meeting time and I said I would get the video.

On the meeting day it was something like 23 below and clear with a stiff wind, non the less eight people showed up and we began watching the video and drinking coffee.

When the tape was finished and as I was putting away the equipment I noticed a hum in the room of excited voices. One person was herd to say well we aren't any different than those folks in that we live in the mountains and have lost our rail road and we all know each other. I think that we could attempt to do something like that/.

Carl Rod then suggested that we approach the Haymarket Peoples Fund for one of their mini grants. He was quick to note that it was not the money as much as it force the group to focus on what they were attempting to do. Therefore He and two others of the group John McCarthy and Irene Bean formed a task force to approach the Haymarket Fund.. They further agreed to meet in six weeks and explore other venture ideas as well as have a draft ready for discussion.

In the time between the January meeting and the February meeting several people in the community of Littleton ask as to whether we were attempting to develop yet another small business development center and pointedly noted that there was one already in the area.

I to the best of my ability said that was not the case and that in fact we looked towards the day when we could make use of the small business center.

I also meet with a representative of the Haymarket peoples \Fund and explained what the group had in mind. I was told that the Fund did not fund economic development efforts and that we ought to look elsewhere for funding for the effort. I reminded the representative of the fund that if one were to address oppression and attendant problems that one had to address the issue of economic opportunity or its lack. That one could not have political democracy without economic democracy. At the end of the meeting the representative said that he thought upon hearing what the group had in mine that they ought to submit a proposal.

I carried this information back to the February meeting.

The group decided that they wanted to create a umbrella organization that would assist people to form a action agenda for working on cooperative economics in the North Country and that they would call the effort the North Country Federation for Economic Development..I(noted at the time that no one could remember the name and they all laughed. However two days later one of the group called and said that they could not remember the name and were attempting to write a draft for the grant, could; could I help them...

The deadline for the grant was May 1st. and here we were in February with no organizational structure or solid membership, so what to do.

First a team was set up to write the grant as that was what the group wanted to do even though I suggested that we set up an organizational structure. The groups response to that was we will do that later.

The team wrote a draft and set a early April meeting up, and asked if I would invite Michael Swack to that meeting to test their approach out on a real professional, I only being the local college instructor.

Graciously Michael assented to come up and meet with the group. It was during this now infamous April meeting that the group began to take on a form of its own and this happened as a result of their testing their ideas out on Michael and reflecting among themselves as to what approaches might or might not work for them in the North Country in attempting to build cooperative economic structures.

With the grant written (see attached copy) the group began to look at what type of ventures might be good for them to explore

Some suggested a bottled water operation, others suggested a wreath and Christmas tree operation, yet others suggested crafts and yet others suggested a dud farm for city folks. Some even suggested a food processing operation as yet a another suggestion was that landscaping service

would be the ticket. But all lacked detailed knowledge of the field or any idea of the costs to be incurred in starting up such a venture.

This then raised the first of several central questions which confront groups that wish to embark on a venture of Community Based Economics. Where do you go for facts and how do you organize these facts?

As the group began to wrestle with these and a host of other questions they slowly began to form a sense of togetherness and to assemble a collective data base as well getting a feel for what each knew regarding each venture under review.

In late May they were told that they would have to come to Concord to present their grant idea to the funding board of there Haymarket Fund. So Irene Bean and John McCarthy went and made the presentation for the group.

In late June they were told that they had been awarded their grant and much joy was had that day in Mudville.

The group meet in mid June with Juile P executive director of the New Hampshire Community load fund to explore with her some of their venture ideas they were all interested in the the Bottle water and christmas wreath and tree operation.

They had begun to deal with the gathering of information and to see how they might get such a venture off the ground.

In Mid July I was contacted by one of the group to say that they and a couple of other wanted to push ahead with the bottle water idea I said fine and began to gather some

information on what was happening in the Bottled water area of the world, for I had little if any idea what was the state of the art or lack thereof.

At about the same time some of the group remembered that they had meet some policeman in a computer class from Brockton the previous November and that they had said that might be interested in selling trees in conjunction with the group. So they set about contacting the Police.

What ended up as a dead end regarding the potential of the police selling trees for them, but it turned out to open up other avenue of thought and lead to a new approach in that of making contact with some of the community leadership In Roxbury that might in the future give them a hand in marketing the bottle water

By early September the bottled water idea had progressed to the point that a group meeting was called for at Irene Beans house up in Coldbrooke and a full discussion of the potential resources were covered. This included7included which springs were already owned and which needed be put under option. What the state board of health required and how to handle them, how to approach the existing bottling plant that was doing water and how to begin to explore sources of investment capital.

Irene took the lead and two members of the joined her in following up on data.

It was also at this meeting that it was announced that there would be a conference for woman in Business jointly

sponsored by the New Hampshire Charitable Fund, The Indian Head North Bank and Learning In The North Country.

(See enclosed brochure)

What may or may not be apparent in the above recounting is that unlike our urban counterparts, frustration with the system that make for a willingness to break with the hallowed past regarding economic development .In a nut shell there is still a strong pull towards what I have dubbed" John Wayne Economics" i.e. the lone frontiersmen making their way in the unknown and unchartered wilds of small business development and any means is ok a just as long as a profit is turned.

There is fear that once again they residents of small towns and rural areas will be taken advantage of, that some mysterious force will come from outside their community and take control. event while the franchise and chain are doing so in the light of day.

There is also a hesitancy that the perceived and real level of knowledge regarding the development and running of small business is quite different from that of their urban counterparts. This is strange in that for years it has been the small town yankee who has started a number of highly successful business ventures.

However the flip side of this story is that those who have suffered the worst have done least and have been afforded the lease in terms of skill acquisition needed to run successful small business.

Therefore What I decided to do was to create through a series of meetings and a conference in the fall of 1986 a living learning lab that would begin to assist residents of the north country country in acquiring skills and introducing ideas that are inherent in community economic development.

To what extent have I been successful; in this actionworkshop approach?

Well We have encouraged and seen formed three new enterprises however only one thus far is being developed as a community economic development enterprise. Hopefully more will follow if this one is effective in accomplishing its goals.

We have also developed a struggling group that is concerned with building networks in the North Country and this group continues to raise questions and bring people together for their mutual benefit. In addition we have begun to explore how to build networks around economic issues with our urban brothers and sisters.

So what is the next step? There are several. One is that of remaining supportive of the small nascent group that has come together to support community economic development. Second is to attract potential investors to take serious looks at the suggested ventures and get them to interact with of the group so that they group can learn first hand what investors look like talk like and are looking for.

Thirdly to develop basic skills in the general population regarding community economic development