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## A Heart and Soul Approach to Community Planning: The Borderlands Village Innovation Pilot Project

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A citizen's approach to community planning is being tested in small towns and rural communities throughout New England and the Rocky Mountain West. The Heart and Soul community planning approach begins by asking as many residents as possible what makes their town special; why they choose to live there; and what makes it stand out from other communities. This approach is unique in small town New England, where all too often citizen engagement gets put on the back burner due to limitations of town budgets and professional expertise. The Orton Family Foundation of Middlebury, Vermont, is helping communities pursue this bottom-up approach and implement visions and land-use regulations based on broadly held values and a strong community identity. The Borderlands Village Innovation Pilot project, focused on Exeter, Rhode Island, and Killingly, Connecticut, is a test run of this innovative process.

Towns across the country are struggling with how to maintain their identity. Betsy Rosenbluth of the Orton Family Foundation states: "How does a community change while still holding on to its heart and soul, or its unique community identity? Rather than be run over by or reactive to development, communities are trying to come together to decide what they want to be. Instead of saying no to a particular development, they're determining what they're saying yes to." (Fillisko 2011). That is what Heart and Soul planning is all about.

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **Rural New England**

Planners and residents throughout rural New England struggle with how to balance community growth and conservation. Land-use decisions in New England are made at the local level by municipal volunteer boards and commissions. There is minimal regional and statewide planning. Property tax issues and "growing the grand list" often drive land-use decisions on a town by town basis with limited incentive for communities to cooperate. Many rural towns see development as the only answer to meeting education and other community needs. Such towns often are afraid to say no to development because they lack the information and tools to understand its mid- and long-term impacts; they can be sold a bill of goods about how development — any development — will improve the community.

New Englanders also cherish their region's historic and agricultural heritage. Residents increasingly seek out local agricultural products as awareness of food security, health issues, and the economic value of agriculture has increased. A recent University of Connecticut study estimated that Connecticut's agricultural industry had a "\$3.5 billion impact including 20,000 jobs, and significant social benefits and ecosystem services" in 2007 (Lopez 2010).

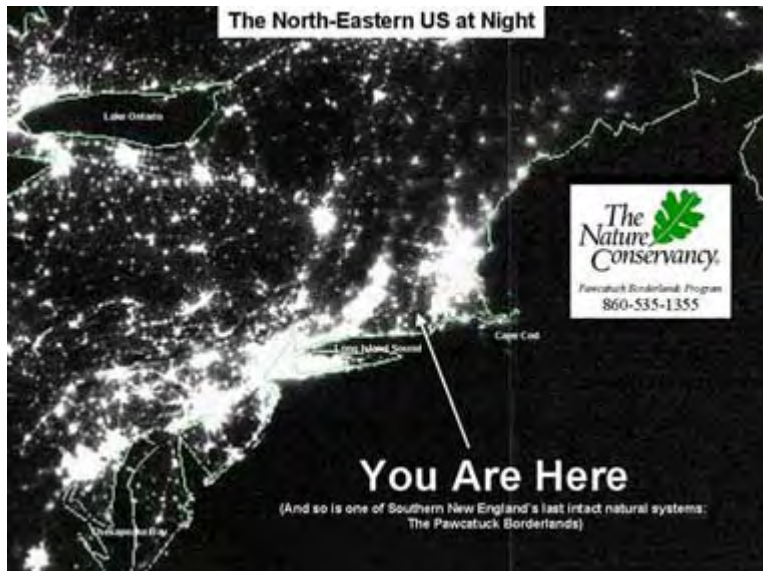
Residents appreciate and enjoy the region's natural resources, forestlands, and abundant clean water, as shown in Figure 1. They value this rural quality of life, as identified again and again in community surveys and in comprehensive plans as top priorities. Communities, however, often do not know how to protect those values and resources, while simultaneously promoting economic development opportunities and residents' needs. In eastern Connecticut and western Rhode Island, the story is the same.



▣ *Figure 1*  
Forests and Farmland along the Quinebaug River, courtesy  
Leslie Sweetnam

### **Partnerships Develop**

In 2001, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) identified the Pawcatuck Borderlands as the largest block of unfragmented forestland between Boston and Washington, D.C. (Barbour 2003), a 200-square mile area of remarkable ecosystem diversity (see Figure 2 for a satellite image of the Pawcatuck Borderlands). TNC also was aware of significant threats to this forestland and its surrounding watershed, since the region is bounded by urban development. TNC made this landscape a priority for protection ([www.nature.org](http://www.nature.org)). However, TNC understood it could not purchase the entire region and thus should explore alternative approaches to maintaining the core forest block.



▣ *Figure 2*  
Pawcatuck Borderlands Nighttime Satellite Image, courtesy  
The Nature Conservancy

Meanwhile, the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council was interested in the region because of its unique sense of place and the region's recreational assets. It saw an opportunity to create economic and community development while conserving and enhancing the natural amenities that make the region unique. In 2003, the Economic Policy Council partnered with TNC to protect the character and resources of the Pawcatuck Borderlands and surrounding communities. Over the next few years, the Borderlands partnership hosted a series of regional sharing and learning events to further define the issues, threats, and needs of the region (Essington and McBride 2007).

The partners soon realized that all the towns up and down the Connecticut and Rhode Island state line were facing similar issues relating to community growth and conservation, so the Borderlands Region was expanded to include all 20 towns (Essington and McBride 2007). The 20 towns and the core Pawcatuck Borderlands forest block are shown in Figure 3. The partnership developed a website ([www.borderlandsproject.org](http://www.borderlandsproject.org)) to serve as a portal of information for the region and to provide opportunities for information sharing. Partners also hosted workshops addressing topics of concern.



▣ *Figure 3*  
The Borderlands Region, courtesy The Nature Conservancy

The first event, held in May 2005, was a Regional Collaboration Clinic facilitated by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. This was the first outreach effort to identify specific issues facing the Borderlands Region. A follow-up social event, the Borderlands Barbecue, was held over the summer. These events were designed to get folks talking about the region and making connections across town lines. The following year, two workshops were held to address concerns heard at the first two programs.

Themes began to surface. One topic that rose to the top was an interest in reinventing historic village centers to serve as centers for economic development and community growth (McBride and Essington 2007). When viewing a map of the region that highlights population density (see Figure 4), it becomes clear that the villages form a necklace around the core forestland. Residents and communities were interested in maintaining this development pattern and protecting the core forest, but they didn't know how to do that or where to begin. Many of these small towns have limited professional planning assistance. In 2006, the partnership hosted two regional workshops to begin to address these issues. The workshops — "Reinventing the Village: Perspectives on Economic Development and Affordable Housing in the Borderlands" and "Transfer of Development Rights: Potential Applications for the Borderlands Region" — were very well-attended and began to explore these concerns. It was clear,

however, that a more in-depth approach was needed.

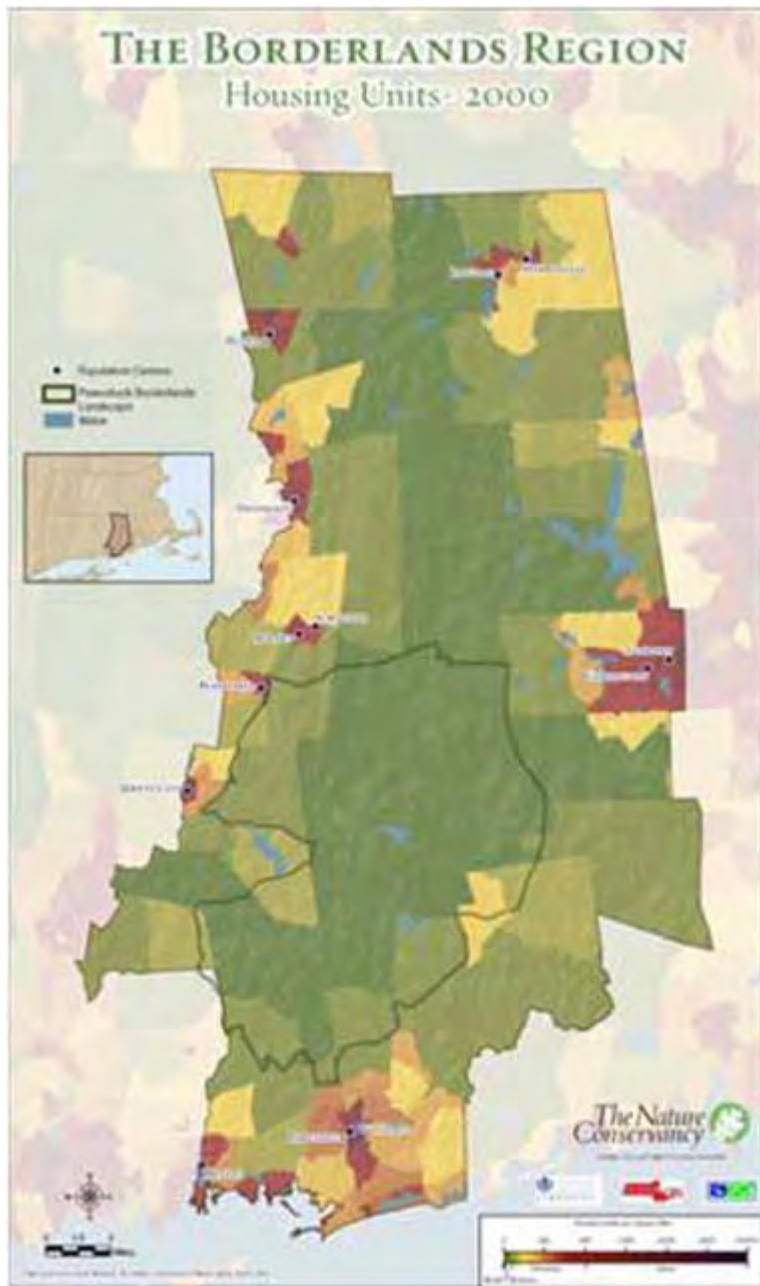


Figure 4  
The Borderlands Region Housing Units Map, courtesy The Nature Conservancy

By 2007 the Borderlands Partnership began to evolve and the Orton Family Foundation became a leading partner. The foundation provides communities with technical assistance and funding to help identify their unique character and values by reaching out to all residents. The foundation also helps communities figure out how to maintain their unique character and natural resources as they grow and develop. The mission of the foundation is to "help small cities and towns describe, apply, and uphold their heart and soul so that they can adapt to change while maintaining or enhancing the things they value most" ([www.orton.org](http://www.orton.org)). This became the goal of the Borderlands Village Innovation Pilot Project.

#### FACTS OF THE CASE

##### A New Initiative Emerges

The Borderlands Village Innovation Pilot emerged as the Orton Family Foundation's first Heart and Soul

project in 2007. A bi-state advisory group of state, regional, and local public and private partners was created to guide development of the project. The project partners and the advisory group decided that the best way to address the issues facing the Borderlands region was to work at the municipal level where most land-use decisions are made. In New England, municipalities or towns are the political entities that control land development, education, and many other public sector responsibilities. States are completely divided up into individual towns and there is no county government in most small New England states.

The Borderlands partners invited all 20 towns in the region to apply to participate in the pilot project. They hoped to share the lessons learned through the pilot with the larger region through periodic regional sharing events and the Borderlands website ([www.borderlandsproject.org](http://www.borderlandsproject.org)).

Two towns were selected, Exeter, Rhode Island, and Killingly, Connecticut. These communities represent the opposite ends of the spectrum of towns in the Borderlands region. Exeter is a small, rural community with a population of 6,000. It never had a town center. Killingly is a larger community with a population of 17,000. It has many village centers and a core downtown area that grew up around mills located along the town's many watercourses.

Killingly's core downtown, Danielson, now has many vacant storefronts (see Figure 5). The town also has seven independent village centers. There is a new big box development and underutilized commercial development along the town roads. The eastern part of town remains very rural. A series of rivers, reservoirs, and lakes are dispersed throughout the community. Killingly recognizes the need to reinvent its centers and to protect important natural resources and the rural eastern part of town.



▣ *Figure 5*  
Downtown Danielson

Exeter grew up as an agricultural community with no center (see Figure 6). The majority of the western portion of the town is protected by the state as part of the Arcadia Management Area. There is scattered, small-scale commercial development along the highway corridors in the center of town and along the eastern edge. The town is concerned about its capacity to handle additional growth and maintain its rural character. A new commuter rail station is slated to open at the end of 2011 in Wickford Junction just east of town. This will provide much easier access to T.F. Green Airport in Warwick, Rhode Island; to Providence, Rhode Island, and to Boston (Urban Land Institute 2010). Town leaders understand the potentially significant growth-inducing impact the new rail access could have on their community.



▣ *Figure 6*  
Agriculture in Exeter

### **Heart and Soul Visioning**

Phase I of the pilot began with an in-depth Heart and Soul visioning process. The pilot was designed to help each town identify a clear vision for future growth and conservation through strategic public engagement. Subsequent phases would develop research and recommendations for implementing that vision. Various partners contributed funding and other resources to the project over time, including the Orton Family Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, the RI Foundation, and Northeast Utilities. Many other partners participated in the project by offering time, expertise and support, including the Washington County (Rhode Island) Regional Planning Council and the Northeast Connecticut Council of Governments.

In both towns, the first step was to develop a local pilot team to lead the project. Pilot team members represented a diversity of local stakeholders and perspectives. These volunteers provided guidance on the project's design and served as ambassadors in the towns. Also, both town councils signed a partnership agreement with the Orton Family Foundation and the Nature Conservancy. This agreement laid out the roles and responsibilities of each partner and was very useful for clarification as the project moved forward.

The project partners hired a part-time project coordinator to pull together the efforts of the bi-state advisory group, the consultant team, and the pilot teams. The coordinator was a local planner already working regionally for the Green Valley Institute. A team of consultants also was hired to lead the Phase I efforts, including: Dodson Associates from Ashfield, Massachusetts; the Consensus Building Institute from Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Forsee Consulting from Colorado.

### **Phase 1 Takes Off**

Exeter and Killingly began Phase I by identifying resources of historic, natural and cultural value. Participants asked very pointed questions like, "What, if lost, would change your community forever?" Both towns developed Places of the Heart maps (see Figure 7) and issues and opportunities maps (see Figure 8), which in some cases identified resources as both issues and opportunities. Many of the old mills in Killingly were in this category — mills that were in serious need of rehabilitation but also offered opportunities for future development.

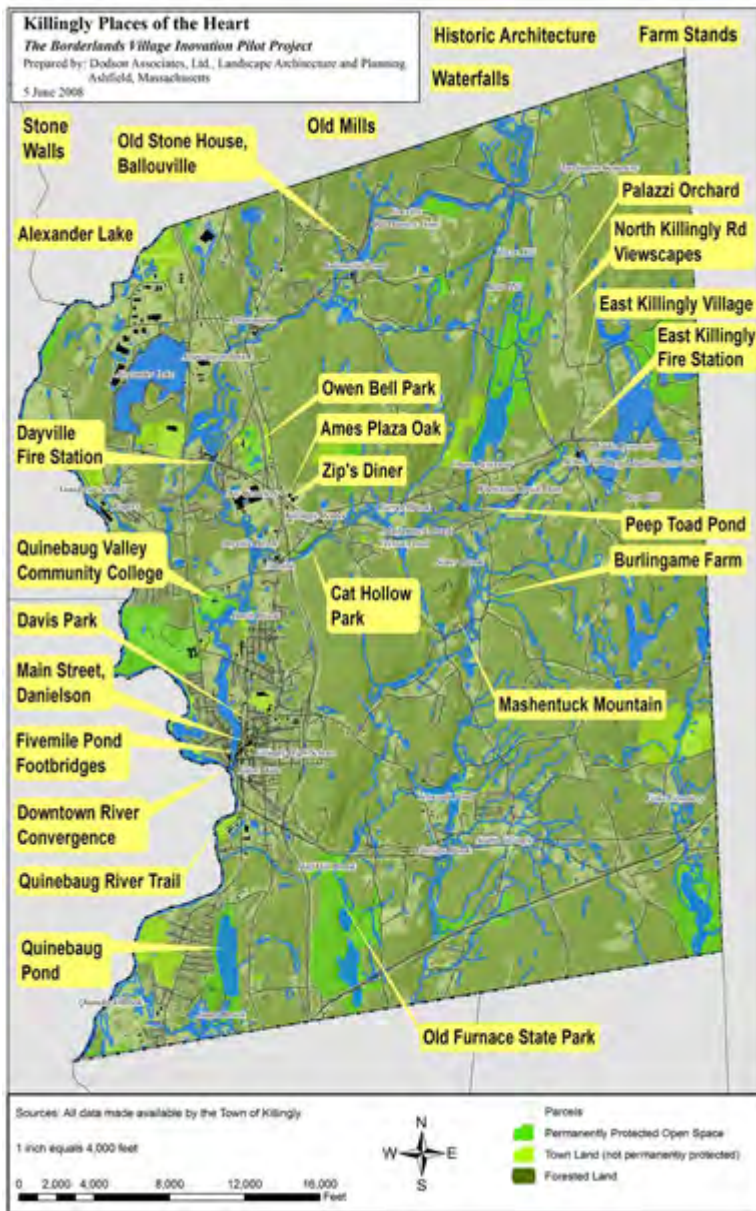


Figure 7  
 Killingly Places of the Heart Map

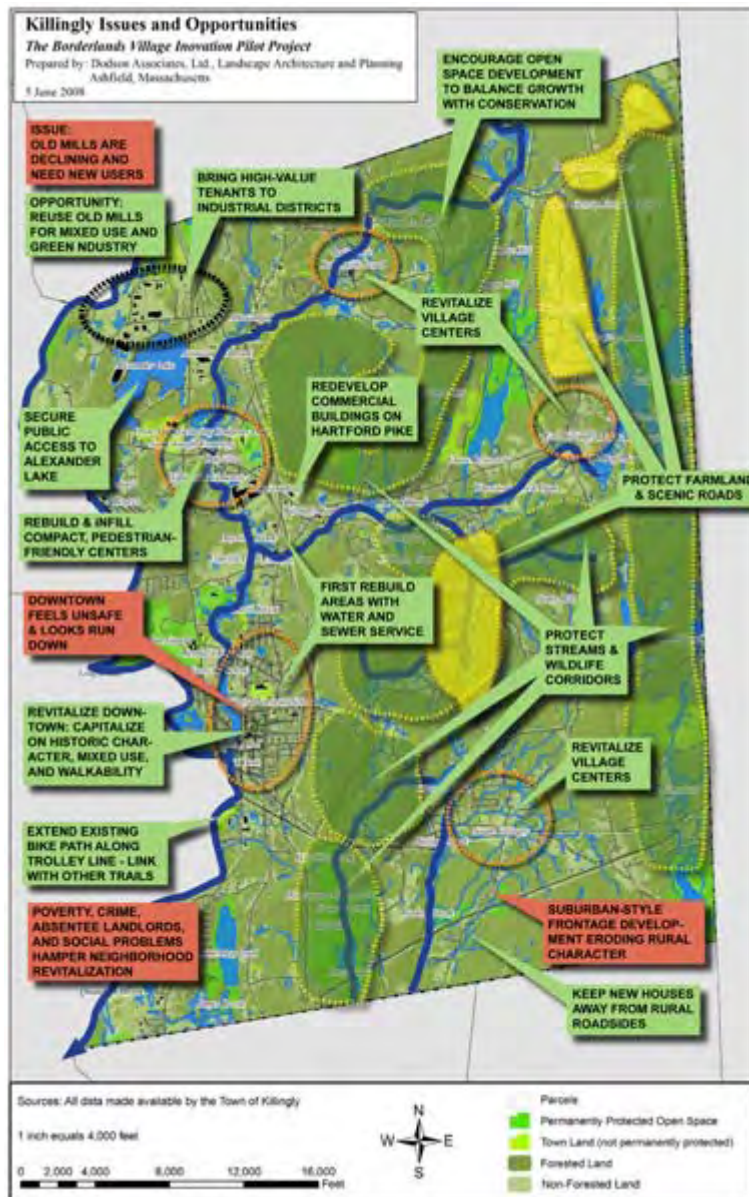


Figure 8  
 Killingly Issues and Opportunities Map

### Outreach — Exeter

Exeter began its outreach efforts with a series of focus group meetings aimed at various stakeholder groups in town. The Consensus Building Institute facilitated the meetings with representatives from business and industry, public safety, farmers, loggers, seniors, longtime residents, parents, fiscal conservatives, gentlemen farmers, large landowners, and residents of specific neighborhoods. Attendance at some of the meetings was low, but it was a good start at information gathering.

In the spring of 2008, Exeter's pilot team began to plan its first public visioning workshop. Key pads were used to gain input on what the community valued — or its Heart and Soul. Key pads are great tools to get everyone in the room actively participating in a meeting and results are presented instantly. Key pads also were used as part of a visual preference survey, designed to determine future development preferences for the community. Participants were then divided into small groups to further discuss Exeter's issues and identify priorities for future study. Overall, participants were very engaged, and attendance at this meeting was good for a small town (see Figure 9).



▣ *Figure 9*  
Participants at Exeter's First Visioning Session

A unique outreach opportunity presented itself in Exeter. The town's high school has a talk show produced by students, and two members of Exeter's pilot team and the project coordinator were interviewed. A video of the interview was posted on the high school's website and used to get the word out about the project to a larger audience.

Exeter held a second public workshop in the fall of 2008. Many of those who attended began to look at the Exeter's future in a new light. The consultant team presented information about development alternatives and used CommunityViz (a computerized visualization tool) to view future development patterns. Attendees also participated in a "chip game," developed by Forsee Consulting. This game used a map of the town overlain with natural features and a grid, as a game board. Game pieces fit into the grid and represented the buildout of the community based on current zoning regulations (see Figure 10). The pieces represented various land uses and densities according to zoning. The game required a banker who was charged with keeping track of pieces as they were traded in for other pieces that represented other land uses and densities, but still equaled the overall buildout of the town. It was very interesting to see how quickly folks realized that if they allowed more density in some parts of town, they would be able to protect other more rural parts of town (Dodson Associates 2009).



▣ *Figure 10*  
Playing the 'Chip Game'

The initial outreach and engagement phase in Exeter was successful in that it got those who participated to think about what they valued most and about future development alternatives. Although participation in Exeter's outreach events was somewhat limited, it was fairly consistent throughout Phase I. The pilot team felt that it was important to continue to reach out to a wider audience in Phase II and to consider additional outreach methods as they moved forward.

### **Outreach — Killingly**

The Killingly pilot team worked with the consultants to reach out to the community in multiple ways. They developed an online survey to identify heart and soul values and to understand the community's concerns about its future. The survey response rate was fairly low. The pilot team improved the response rate by participating in a townwide event, the 300th Birthday Bash. The pilot team set up an informational booth with pictures to attract attention and surveys were completed on the spot. The most surveys were completed by pilot team members approaching folks standing in line waiting for their children to have their faces painted. Pilot team members talked with folks about their concerns for the future of Killingly and helped them complete the survey.

The pilot team also worked with the Consensus Building Institute to host a series of focus groups. These meetings attempted to reach out to various groups in Killingly, including seniors, social service organizations, public safety personnel, business owners, Alexander's Lake residents, real estate professionals, workforce members, youth, newcomers, educators, large landholders, and others. There was good feedback in all meetings, but some groups had low attendance.

In late spring 2008, the pilot team and the consultants hosted a public visioning workshop to gain more input. Attendance at this meeting was poor. There were some conflicts (competing meetings and events) in town that evening, but overall the team members felt they were having trouble reaching out to various groups. They were frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of interest and concern for the future of their town. The Orton Family Foundation heard this concern and decided to bring in more help. They were aware of a consultant who was teaching communities and organizations very different ways to engage stakeholders.

### **Discovery Process™ Training**

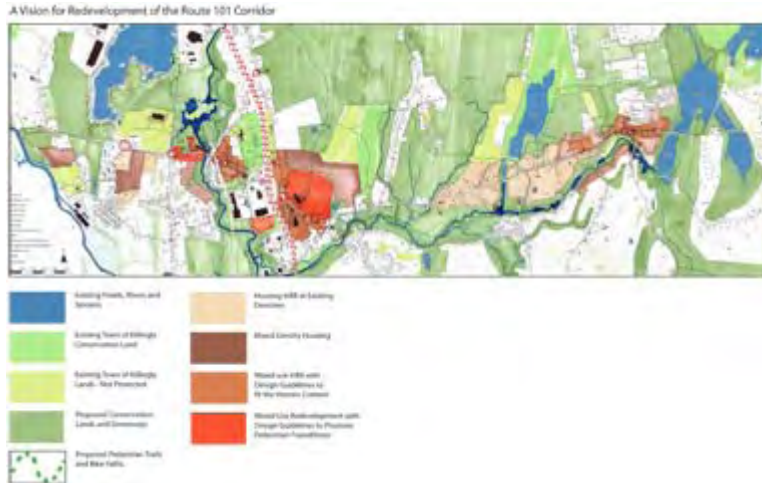
In the fall of 2008, James Kent Associates (JKA) came to Killingly for three weeks. The firm conducted a two-and-a-half day training for the pilot team and other interested residents. JKA taught the team an entirely new approach to community engagement, called the Discovery Process (JKA 2008). Instead of asking folks to come to town meetings, they told the team to go out into the community and meet with people on their turf, and to listen and observe. JKA encouraged pilot team members to visit the various gathering places in town — restaurants, bars, laundries, and stores. Team members observed what was going on around them. They listened and talked to folks and did not push their own views or the project's agenda. They then brought the information gathered through this process back to the larger group.

This new approach to community engagement involved "entering the routines of the community to understand how the community functions, how people communicate in everyday life, the stories they express that tie them to the land and kinship, what the current issues are and the cultural mechanisms in place for getting things done" (JKA 2008). The pilot team wished it had learned about this technique earlier in the project and hopes to use it in future community planning efforts.

JKA staff also spent time (10 days) reaching out and observing in Killingly. As trained staff with dedicated project time, they were able to bring good insight back to the pilot team. The pilot team understood that this form of information gathering is very time consuming but also extremely valuable. Team members also felt there was value in having outsiders, who weren't already known in the community, conduct information gathering. Many members were active in the community and felt that their "baggage" may have interfered in a truly objective discussion. JKA's approach is based on a concept called social ecology, which recognizes that "the social, economic and ecological elements of community life must be integrated to foster long-term health and sustainability" (JKA 2008). JKA's approach also relies on the idea that change is most effective from the "inside out." JKA believes that "long-lasting change is built upon informal community systems already in place to handle the challenges of everyday life" (JKA 2008). The Discovery Process is a unique approach to community outreach with lessons for many towns. In Killingly this approach was useful for gaining input from many facets of the community who are not normally involved and do not regularly attend meetings.

## Focus on Route 101

About halfway through Phase I, the Killingly pilot team decided to focus project resources on the Route 101 corridor, because that corridor is in transition and provides a nice transect of land uses and issues found throughout the community. Following the Route 101 corridor from west to east is an old mill village, a new big box development, an underutilized commercial strip, smaller village centers, and expansive rural areas, including a horse farm, large reservoirs, and important stream corridors (see Figure 11). The pilot team hoped the lessons learned along this corridor could be used to address similar issues throughout the town. The team also understood that the community already was concerned about this area as a result of recent development. It hoped that focusing on the 101 corridor would help instill a sense of urgency that had so far been lacking.



▣ *Figure 11*  
Killingly's Route 101 Corridor, courtesy Dodson Associates

## University Students

In the fall of 2008, landscape architecture students from the University of Connecticut were brought into the project to conduct research, assist with meeting facilitation, and develop alternative design scenarios for various locations along the Route 101 corridor. The students brought a lot of energy, enthusiasm, and creative ideas to the project.

The "church meeting," as it came to be known because it was held in the basement of a church, was a turning point for the public engagement component of this project in Killingly. Seventy people attended the meeting. A number of things came together at this point: discovery process training; student involvement; and a sense of urgency. At this time, more people had heard about the project. Folks already were concerned about the Route 101 corridor. They were unhappy with some of the impacts of recent development and were concerned about the underutilized and vacant commercial space along that corridor.

The landscape architecture students facilitated the "church meeting," which was led by Dodson Associates (see Figure 12). They asked the groups what their concerns were now and for the future of the corridor. The students used the information gathered to develop alternative design scenarios for four different locations along the corridor including: a traditional village downtown, a newer commercial area, a rural scenic road/residential district, and a rural historic village (University of Connecticut 2009).



▣ *Figure 12*  
 University of Connecticut landscape architecture students  
 facilitating public workshop

The students' design scenarios were a unique opportunity for the pilot team to think about the Route 101 corridor in a new light (see Figure 13). Design students bring fresh ideas to a project that aren't saddled with regulatory or economic development concerns, thus allowing for more creativity. However, it is very important to point this out upfront, and some residents will take exception to this approach. Some were concerned that the scenarios weren't valid because they weren't "real" enough. On the other hand, other residents really took hold of these new ideas, and the town is exploring a few of them as options.



▣ *Figure 13*  
 Dayville Site Plan, courtesy University of Connecticut  
 Landscape Architecture Students

### Phase I Results

Through Phase I, the Exeter team found that their community was very concerned about protecting its rural character (see Figure 14) and about future community development. The town is interested in exploring alternatives to the development patterns laid out in land-use regulations. Residents began to

understand the value of promoting additional density in some parts of town or in a new town center in order to protect the more rural parts of town and important natural resources. Potential locations for a new center or centers were identified at the second visioning workshop. The consultant team developed a summary report titled, "A Vision for Exeter: Developing a Game Plan for Our Future, Phase I Final Report" (Dodson Associates 2009).



▣ *Figure 14*  
Exeter's Rural Character

Through the visioning process, the Killingly pilot team heard that its community wanted to focus new development in areas that are currently developed along Route 101 by maintaining and reinvigorating existing village centers and the Four Corners Gateway. The community was also concerned about protecting the rural eastern part of the Route 101 corridor, including important water resources, and increasing awareness and access to these resources. The consultant team developed a summary report titled "Envisioning Killingly's Future, Phase I Final Report" (Dodson Associates 2009).

### **Phase II Evolves**

In March 2009, the project partners hosted a regional sharing event. Pilot team members from Killingly and Exeter presented lessons they learned in Phase I. They talked about their experiences and strategies and techniques that worked and didn't work so well. The audience appreciated the candidness of the pilot teams. There were more than 60 attendees from communities throughout the region, surrounding communities, state agencies, and nonprofit organizations.

The partners and the pilot teams from both towns then developed a work plan for Phase II based on what they heard in Phase I and the consultant's recommendations. The plan that evolved for Killingly focused on additional public engagement and further investigation of the Route 101 corridor, particularly the Four Corners Gateway and water access issues. In Exeter, the plan involved refining future growth alternatives, protecting rural character, and engaging the wider community.

### **Pursuing a Vision for Exeter**

Exeter's public outreach approach in Phase II included a direct mailing of the Phase I Executive Summary to every residence in town. They decided this was the best way to spread the word about the results of Phase I. The pilot team also presented an overview of the project at two small "house parties," a local restaurant, and a meeting of the local fire districts. Folks invited their friends and neighbors to learn more about the project and to give their input on Phase II. The team felt that this was a most effective way to get the word out (Millar 2011).

In January 2010, Exeter received a \$98,500 planning grant from the State of Rhode Island to further develop the village concept. The town is currently conducting analyses and continues to reach out to the community to build consensus. This work includes:

- A cost-benefit analysis of village development;
- Design standards that fit Exeter's character;
- Preparation of implementing ordinances; and
- Assessment of the potential for a transfer of development rights program (Town of Exeter 2010).

Exeter is in the midst of the village analysis, and its results remain to be seen. Exeter hosted two public meetings in Phase II. At the most recent meeting people voted on options for a new village location or no village at all. The overwhelming majority supported a new village at the site of the Exeter mall (an existing strip development). Another public meeting was scheduled for February 2011 to share conceptual village design alternatives and get feedback on appropriate density and types of uses (Millar 2011).

In October 2010, a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) was conducted in Exeter under the direction of the Urban Land Institute. This one-day session was designed to address "the viability of the town's proposed Village Center concept" (Urban Land Institute 2010). The TAP consisted of expert volunteers from a range of disciplines associated with land use and development. The TAP reviewed the history of the project, spent time touring the town, met with a select group of stakeholders in a "closed door" charrette, and presented recommendations. The TAP's recommendations included: "clustered villages" around existing commercial nodes along Route 2; revising zoning to encourage higher density; tracking regional projects; and investing in public infrastructure. The TAP suggested that although there currently is not a strong demand for new commercial growth in Exeter, there is demand for residential growth to support existing business and potential to encourage new development (Millar 2011). The "clustered villages" approach recommended by the TAP involves enhancing existing commercial and office development as smaller town centers and beginning to implement necessary changes, including revising zoning (Urban Land Institute 2010).

### **Killingly's Vision for Water Access**

Killingly's Conservation Commission took the lead in pursuing water access and related activities, a community desire that was identified through the discovery process. The commission held a number of stream cleanups. In the summers of 2009 and 2010 it coordinated a series of informal paddles, bringing interested folks to various water bodies and watercourses throughout town to canoe or kayak and experience Killingly's wonderful natural resources (see Figure 15). The commission hopes to help build more cartop boat launches and otherwise increase access, knowledge, and respect for the town's water resources.



▣ *Figure 15*  
Killingly Paddles

### **Expanded Youth Involvement**

In an effort to expand community outreach, the Killingly pilot team decided to involve middle school students. The Killingly Intermediate School (KIS) had a core group of faculty who were already interested in water-related issues. The pilot funded field trips to local watercourses for sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders. Different grades focused on different issues related to water for the Quinebaug River Watershed Study. Some projects were science-based, others historical, and others language arts. The final results were presented at a school assembly in June 2010. Students developed PowerPoint presentations, iMovies and iBooks that presented an overview of the project, processes, and results.

A group of students from KIS also painted a mural on one of the old mill buildings along the Five Mile River in downtown Danielson. That effort, supported by the pilot, depicts a historic scene of Danielson and is located adjacent to a new town park (see Figure 16 for image of the mural in progress).



▣ *Figure 16*  
Mural of Historic Danielson, by Killingly Intermediate School Students

### **CommunityViz Training**

The Orton Family Foundation also provided support for Killingly's town staff to learn CommunityViz, a software program that helps communities analyze future development patterns. Communities can view 3D models of development alternatives and aerial flyovers and analyze various impacts of new development, including impacts to taxes, schools, and other municipal services. Killingly decided that instead of having the consultant conduct a CommunityViz analysis for town staff, it made more sense for staff to learn the program themselves so they would be able to use it in the future. The training was very well-received, but the town staff did have some difficulty with the program. Overall, they felt they needed to devote more time to familiarizing themselves with the program and building the model, and it was difficult to find that time.

### **Four Corners Gateway**

The Four Corners, located at the intersection of an interstate highway interchange with two key state routes, is an important community gateway. It consists primarily of underutilized suburban commercial development, as shown in Figure 17. There are a number of vacant structures as well. There is excessive parking with uncoordinated curb cuts. The area is not pedestrian friendly, and there are significant traffic concerns. Just west of the interstate is a new big box development.



▣ *Figure 17*  
Four Corners Commercial Development

The majority of the Four Corners area is zoned for low-density commercial development, which the pilot team began to understand may not be the best use for the area. The team worked with Dodson Associates again to take a more detailed look at development options for that area. The team and consultant hosted a series of stakeholder meetings, as well as two public workshops, to identify the needs and concerns of landowners and business owners in the Four Corners area. These meetings utilized a visual preference survey, key pad polling, and charrette-style techniques to identify the preferred character and uses of the gateway. (For the top preference identified in the survey, see Figure 18.)



▣ *Figure 18*  
Top Visual Preference Image, Four Corners Gateway

The consultant took a detailed look at the site and the surrounding area, listened to the stakeholders and the public, and developed a series of alternative development scenarios for the Four Corners. The alternatives ranged from a "modest Main Street" option, which required some change to existing conditions, to the "internal Main Street" option that much more radically altered the direction of future development. The residents and stakeholders overwhelmingly supported the internal Main Street option, exhibited in Figure 19. That alternative was the most pedestrian friendly. Its design was small scale and village style with parking behind the buildings. It incorporated small green spaces and green

connections, and it also included a mix of uses with multi-family residential development in the back, away from the main road.



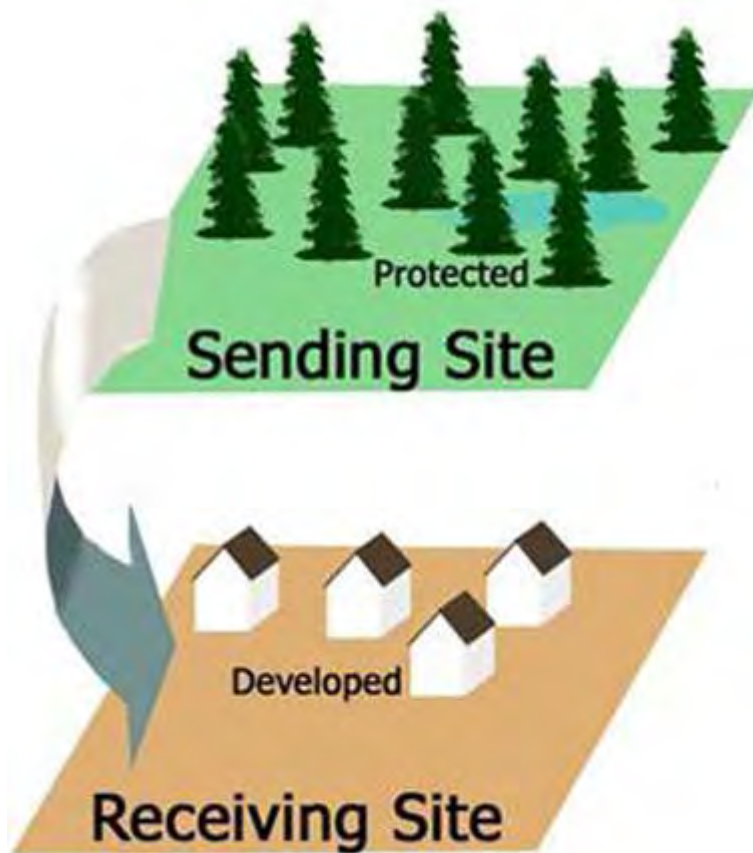
▣ *Figure 19*  
Preferred Master Plan for Four Corners Gateway, courtesy  
Dodson Associates

### **Innovative Tools**

A research project designed to help each town identify the tools needed to implement their visions was conducted by the project coordinator. The resulting report, *Innovative Regulatory Tools to Protect Natural Resources and Focus New Development*, looks at the promising regulatory tools available to New England communities. The report provides each town with easily accessible information about a wide array of tools, including transfer of development rights, design guidelines, and form-based codes (Westa 2010).

Although some of these tools have been used extensively in other parts of the country, they are underutilized in Connecticut and Rhode Island. The report explores implementation examples from New England and provides links to readily accessible information. The report highlights lessons learned from each community and describes why the tools have been successful or not.

For example, transfer of development rights (TDR) (see Figure 20) has not been used much in Rhode Island or Connecticut. One Rhode Island town recently adopted a very comprehensive TDR ordinance, but its impact remains to be seen. A number of towns in Massachusetts have adopted hybrid-type TDR ordinances, which may be easier to implement. The hybrid approach may not be as powerful as a true TDR approach, but land has been protected as a result. Another example is form-based codes, which have just recently gained some attention in Connecticut. One town adopted a form-based code in the fall of 2009, and another is in the process of doing so (Westa 2010). The pilot towns now have a general understanding of these regulations and easy access to additional information when they are ready for implementation.



▣ *Figure 20*  
Transfer of Development Rights, courtesy Green Valley Institute

## OUTCOMES

As a result of the Heart and Soul analysis, Killingly and Exeter have both established visions for the future. Exeter's vision is to identify a new center or centers for community growth while protecting its rural, agricultural character. Killingly's vision is to focus new growth and development in existing village centers and downtown, including the Four Corners area, and to protect rural areas with a focus on water resources. Both towns have a readily available resource (provided in the tools summary report) to help them understand the tools available to implement their visions and as a result of the accompanying workshop.

Killingly and Exeter have accepted community engagement as a priority. It is no longer acceptable to just post a legal notice and hope people will come to a public meeting. The pilot teams and various boards they represent are now aware of a variety of public engagement techniques. There has been a culture change, and they understand the value of involving the community throughout the planning process. Both towns will continue to incorporate community engagement activities as they pursue new approaches to addressing community growth and conservation in the future.

Exeter secured a state planning grant, the second largest in the history of the program, as a result of the pilot's visioning and community engagement work. The pilot's vision has also been officially incorporated into the town's Comprehensive Plan (Orton Family Foundation 2010). The Phase II analysis of alternative village centers is still under way. The insight of the Urban Land Institute's Technical Advisory Panel was useful and made the town think more specifically about changes that are needed to encourage new focused development and discourage sprawl. The results of the state planning grant project will further clarify Exeter's options for pursuing its vision. The majority of town residents attending public meetings are in favor of a new village type development. The density, types of uses, and design of a new center or centers are currently being narrowed down. The town will need to make the changes necessary to implement new development patterns, including revising zoning and

investing in infrastructure.

In Killingly, the conservation commission has taken the lead in engaging the community around water resources. The conservation commission is now drafting a river corridor overlay zone, and the state has designated the Five Mile River as an official greenway. There is also grassroots support for the state's acquisition of important watershed lands in the eastern part of the Route 101 corridor (Orton Family Foundation 2010).

Killingly's efforts to identify a new direction for the Four Corners Gateway with stakeholder and community input are also an important first step. The implementation of regulatory changes will take more time, but the plan and ideas are already being used. As developers and landowners come to the planning or economic development offices to talk about potential development plans, the staff introduces them to the concepts developed through this process. Implementing regulatory changes should eventually be easier, as more people begin to understand and accept this new direction.

There are other important cultural changes in Killingly that are more difficult to capture. The Phase II evaluation summary, completed by the Orton Family Foundation, highlights some of these discrepancies. The evaluation notes that some folks didn't see any reduction in levels of conflict, but others noted the pilot project was valuable in bringing people with opposite views together (Orton Family Foundation 2010). When the project began, the town was virtually split in two. The two sides, "conservation" and "development," did not talk to each other. As a result of the project's outreach efforts and community visioning, many people from both sides are now talking and working together. They realize they have many common concerns and goals for the future of their town.

Opinions changed in many other ways through this unique planning process. At the outset of the pilot project, one of Killingly's longtime planning board members said, "I am going to fight you every step. We don't need some outsider coming into our town and telling us what to do." At another event in the fall of 2010, that same member talked about the project and said, "That Borderlands thing was the best thing I was ever involved in!" These opinion changes will continue to affect the community as it moves forward.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

The Orton Family Foundation completed an in-depth evaluation of Phase I in April 2009 (Orton Family Foundation 2009) and Phase II in December 2010 (Orton Family Foundation 2010). The following lessons learned are excerpted from that report.

- Go slow to go fast. It took the project a while to get off the ground. We even had to take a step back as we were trying to move forward, because there was confusion about the goals of the project and the process. It also took time for word to get out — to generate interest and involvement in a project. It is worth spending time upfront to lay out a project's purpose and process. It is much easier to move forward with a solid base in place. It's also important to spend time reaching out to the public at every step, to get real community "buy-in."
- Set your local committee up for success. The local pilot teams were essential to the project's success. Team members were ambassadors of the project in the community. There were some challenges along the way, including frustration getting the project off the ground and keeping the team interested and involved throughout the project. Some team members were able to jump right on board and stayed involved throughout. Others had difficulty initially but ended up being the project's biggest supporters in the end. A project orientation training early in the process would have been helpful, as would a clear statement of purpose and strong leadership.
- Present a project "road map." A simple graphic with benchmarks can be an important tool to focus a volunteer team and as a means to measure progress. The pilot project strove to provide a flexible and open process, which can be good, yet somewhat confusing to volunteers who may not necessarily grasp the whole picture. A "road map" provides a visual reference that can help guide folks through the process and be used as a reference when questions arise. The lack of such a "road map" early on in this project contributed to some of the difficulty getting the project off the ground.
- Develop a media and communications strategy. It's important to lay out a strategy that identifies key targets, highlights project events and milestones to be covered, and identifies responsible parties. Clearly communicating a project's message and developing relationships with local media can be critical to engaging a larger audience. The communications strategy in this case was very informal. Laying out a more formal strategy upfront, identifying events and

responsible parties, would have been useful.

- Know your community networks. Utilizing community networks already in place through local pilot team members is an important strategy. Direct, personal invitations were key to the success of public events in both towns. Killingly also learned about the importance of identifying community networks and of getting out and meeting people on their turf and in their meeting places, through the Discovery Process training. These techniques consume time and require a significant commitment from volunteers but can be worthwhile in the long run.
- Tap into the urgency and interest in a proactive process. To more fully engage the community, the pilot team found that it was important to make connections to issues of immediate concern. The community came out in much greater numbers once the connection was made to the Four Corners/Route 101 issues in Killingly. The pilot team understood the value of a proactive planning process, but that was difficult for others to grasp.
- Create multiple paths for engagement. It is essential to create multiple paths for community engagement since no one path works for everyone. Some folks will fill out surveys; some will come to meetings; some will respond to urgent issues; and others will require one-on-one communication. Killingly and Exeter found that it is well worth pursuing multiple avenues to gain the understanding and support of the larger community.
- Identify actionable issues. It is important to identify issues that can be readily addressed to show progress with a project. Killingly used its "paddles" to bring folks to water resources and to bring attention to the larger project. It is also important to understand the basis of issues of concern. A community member might say they're adamantly opposed to growth, but their real concern may be the impact of that growth on rivers or traffic. The more specific issues may be easier to address and mitigate. Exeter found that folks were most concerned about protecting their rural character, which included protecting natural resources and maintaining low traffic volumes. They also found that people understood that new growth was inevitable and they were willing to consider development alternatives that could accommodate new growth while protecting rural values.
- Engage youth and young adults. Youth can be instrumental in moving a project forward and in engaging the adults in a community. Incorporating student projects and activities like Killingly's watershed study and the downtown mural can bring larger community interest to a project. Integrating social media to engage younger audiences is important as well, and this project had only limited success with that.

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American Planning Association *Making Great Communities Happen*

Q&A — Practicing Planner, Spring 2011

## Postscript on the Borderlands Case: Q&A, Editor and Author

**Editor (Jerry Weitz):** *It may have been a sign of modesty on your part, Susan, not to mention your own role and perspectives in the project. It really didn't jump out at me the role you and the Green Valley Institute played. Was that simply a coordination and management role, or did it include other substantive efforts?*

**Author (Susan Westa):** I was officially hired half time to coordinate the project for two years. It wasn't really all that simple coordinating a team of project partners, two pilot teams of local volunteers, a consultant team, and a Bi-state Advisory Group — setting up meetings, providing direction, and making sure the project moved forward. I was responsible for a wide variety of tasks from developing press releases and meeting announcements to presentations about the project for interested organizations. I was the point person for the project as well. Everyone knew to come to me or point others, such as the press, in my direction so that we had a unified voice about the project. Much of the position didn't necessarily require typical planning skills, but I did learn some things that I will carry with me in the future. Like the communities, I am also thinking about community engagement in new ways.

The role I played in Phase II did utilize more traditional planning skills, especially as I researched and developed the Innovative Regulatory Tools Report. It helped that I had an understanding of these tools before delving into them in detail. All of this information, the research and the project's lessons learned, will continue to inform my work with communities in The Last Green Valley. Planners may not be familiar with the Green Valley Institute (see *Practicing Planner* Volume 3, No. 3, 2005), but we're an educational organization focused on helping communities make better land-use decisions. We develop workshops and seminars and offer technical assistance to a 35-town region. It was great to have the opportunity to focus my efforts over an extended period in two towns through the Borderlands Project. Killingly is also located in The Last Green Valley, so I will be able to assist them to a certain extent as I am available in the future.

**Editor:** *The Borderlands case is inspiring and insightful in many respects. What stands out to me is the amount of financial resources and technical expertise that was brought to bear on the planning issues. Clearly, the Orton Family Foundation's resources, which are not likely to be available to most planning projects of this sort, made a huge difference. Can you share with us in general terms the cost of and funding for the planning project, such as expenditures for consultants and contributions by partners?*

**Author:** You're correct that the Orton Family Foundation's resources, expertise, and support were crucial to this project. The support and in-kind assistance of The Nature Conservancy was also critical. The project partners were able raise funds from the RI Foundation, Northeast Utilities, and others as well. We have estimated the total project cost at about \$283,000. A large portion of the funds was used to pay the consultants and half of my salary for two years. Funds also were used to support the CommunityViz training in Killingly, the Discovery Process Training, public engagement activities, youth involvement, and regional sharing events. Staff in both towns, planning and economic development, also provided necessary in-kind services. Killingly and Exeter both recognize that this project was a unique opportunity and truly appreciate being able to take part in it. For Exeter, this initial investment meant they were able to successfully apply for a Rhode Island statewide planning grant (another \$98,500). Killingly is hoping to build on this opportunity as well.

**Editor:** *Susan, your team brought together what you summarize as "multiple paths of engagement," or in other words, an impressive array of public outreach, facilitation, and participation techniques and activities. These include "heart and soul" visioning, CommunityViz, a "chip game," social events, river*

*paddles, mural painting, focus groups, pilot team management frameworks, Discovery Process™ training, student involvement, and a regional "sharing" event, among others. If you had to single out one of these, could you say there's one that was really the most pivotal in terms of making a difference in the outcomes?*

**Author:** I think the lesson we learned is that multiple paths are really needed to engage diverse community interests and needs. Everyone looks at and thinks about their community differently, and people respond and participate differently. If you try to pursue just one of these approaches, you're going to miss an audience or issue that may be critical to moving your project forward.

In this project there were a couple things that really made a difference in each town. Beginning the process by taking a step back and taking an in-depth look at the "heart and soul" of each community was critical. It set the tone for the rest of the project. In Exeter, thinking about community growth and development in a new way was a significant change, and the "chip game" played a vital role in getting many people to understand the value of a new town center(s). Lessons learned at that meeting continue to be discussed and shared with others as the town analyzes its options for future growth.

The landscape architecture students brought a breath of fresh air and new ideas to the project in Killingly. The Discovery Process brought a perspective that otherwise might not have been considered. Outcomes would have been different without these. Because Killingly is a very diverse community, using multiple approaches was essential. When it comes time to implement regulatory changes, it will be necessary to have buy-in from as many of these groups as possible. And they are now well positioned to do that.

**Editor:** *Given the diversity of consultants and engagement activities involved, the project was bound to run into some conflicts. Do you recall any and if so, how did you reconcile those conflicts?*

**Author:** In Killingly, there was some conflict upfront with the pilot team. Some members were wary of accepting assistance from an outside team of consultants and then from the Discovery Process. But as the pilot team participated in the project they came around and even appreciated the assistance. The consultants actually worked very well together. Dodson Associates even participated in the Discovery Process training and incorporated this information into their plans and summary reports.

In Exeter, early conflicts revolved around deciding how to move the project forward. Conflict may not even be the right word, but some town leaders understood the value of a new town center when they went into the project and they wanted to make that happen right away. It was difficult for them to understand the value of taking a step back to undertake a heart and soul visioning and community engagement process — so that many folks in town understood the value of changing development patterns. Having gone through that process, I think most of them would now agree that it was worthwhile.

**Editor:** *I suspect it is way too early to tell, but can you predict the extent to which the Borderlands participants will amend land-use regulations and otherwise take concrete steps to implement the visions and outcomes? Specifically, do you believe the regional coordination or regulatory mechanisms will be put in place to protect the forest core in Borderlands?*

**Author:** I believe that Exeter and Killingly are well-positioned to make changes to implement their visions and protect important natural resources and open space. I'm not sure other communities will necessarily take action based on the lessons of these two towns, however. There is real value in a community undertaking this process themselves. We've heard that other towns are interested in undertaking a similar process but they don't have the funding to do that. Towns requested assistance at the regional sharing events and individually. As a result, I'm not really sure about the future of the core forest block. It's not in imminent danger, but unless more towns in the region are better positioned to change their development patterns through planning and regulation and there's more support for conservation, the forest core may not be protected into the future.