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Innovative Programs Benefit Historic Places in the Rural Northeast

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From small-town Main Streets and mill buildings along river banks to farmsteads and scenic landscapes, the rural areas of the Northeast are filled with historic resources that residents cherish, that small businesses flourish in, and that visitors from around the world flock to see.

Conservation and continued use of these rural resources pose many challenges for small communities. Volunteer-run local governments and citizen groups are involved in complicated restorations of crumbling historic buildings, legal transactions to protect farmland and scenic vistas, and market assessments for revitalizing Main Streets. In addition, changing economic conditions have contributed to landscapes of abandoned manufacturing facilities, boarded-up stores in village centers, and mile after mile of fallow farmland. Without assistance, it is hard to imagine how these rural areas can respond. Nevertheless, there are signs that communities are turning these conditions around.

Through education and technical assistance in community development, heritage tourism, branding, business development, agricultural promotion, and land conservation, many Northeastern rural towns have stopped the erosion of their quality of life and breathed new energy into their communities. As more models of revitalization of rural economies and conservation of resources

emerge, more communities clamor to put their own stamp on rural preservation. There are numerous entities that offer help, including state agencies, federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit consultants. Traditionally much of this help has come from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and its statewide and local partners. There are other new and interesting sources for assistance emerging as well, offered by innovative state programs and regional nonprofits. Some of the most exciting advances can be found in Vermont through its Downtown Program, in rural regions such as midcoast Maine through Friends of Midcoast Maine, and in Massachusetts through its Community Preservation Act.

VERMONT DOWNTOWN PROGRAM

Vermont's villages and downtowns are a defining part of the state's rural character. For centuries these centers were where the business of daily life took place, but with the automobile, new highways, and attendant strip development and sprawl many of them began a slow decline. According to Paul Bruhn, executive director of the Preservation Trust of Vermont, "The Vermont brand is the foundation of our economic strength. The brand is based on strong downtowns and village centers, a working landscape, and mountains. It is crucial that we are good stewards of all those resources."

Since the 1960s, Vermont has taken steps to encourage development in downtowns and village centers through planning and land-use laws designed to prevent incompatible suburban commercial growth. While helpful, it was not enough to come up with good plans. Communities needed more tools to implement the plans.

In 1994 the Vermont Downtown Program, an affiliate of the National Main Street Center, was initiated to offer technical assistance and other incentives for adaptive use of historic buildings and revitalization of Main Streets. In 1998 the Downtown Development Act was passed to create a formal recognition process for communities committed to revitalizing their downtowns, and to offer them tax credits and other benefits. Later that year, concerned by the challenges facing downtowns, the Vermont Forum on Sprawl (now Smart Growth Vermont) and partners, including the Preservation Trust of Vermont, convened Realtors, developers, preservationists, planners, and government

officials to discuss how to encourage more development downtown. A group of part-

ners that emerged from this conference succeeded in lobbying to expand the tax credits in downtowns and to add village centers and new town centers to the program. In addition, exemptions from state permitting were given for mixed housing projects below a threshold size. Over the years, advocates have successfully pushed for improvements to the program, including raising the caps on the tax credits, expanding eligibility, and offering simplified ways for property owners to access the monetary benefits.

Today there are 23 downtowns, 94 village centers, and one new town center designated under the program. To be eligible for designation as a downtown, the community must have a National Register Historic District, a revitalization plan, and an organization that coordinates downtown work and demonstrates a long-term strategy. Villages, which are usually confined to a very small area in the historic mixed-use center of town, receive fewer benefits but are eligible for designation even without a historic district or plan.

With designation, benefits flowing to municipalities and property owners include a state historic preservation tax credit of 10 percent, a 25 percent facade improvement tax credit, a 50 percent code improvement tax credit for items such as sprinklers, elevators, and lifts (simpler than elevators) and for brownfields abatement, access to a Downtown Transportation Fund, and priority for certain state funds. The tax credits cannot exceed \$1.7 million, a

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small number but one that has grown over the years. With the assistance of Downtown Program staff, members of downtown organizations receive training in business development, market analysis, promotion, and branding. By exempting certain sized mixed-income housing projects in downtowns from Act 250, Vermont's land-use law, the state has added an incentive for developers to locate in these areas. Otherwise, under Act 250, developers would have to meet 10 stringent criteria dealing with matters

ranging from traffic safety, water quality, and air quality to municipal fiscal impact and compliance with both municipal and regional plans.

With the assistance of the Vermont Downtown Program as well as other state programs, communities in Vermont have been able to address many rural preservation needs. Downtowns that have participated in the program have added a significant number of affordable housing units and business space through the rehabilitation of numerous historic structures that were vacant or underutilized. They have constructed sidewalks, completed streetscape projects, improved parking and pedestrian circulation, upgraded building facades, and restored historic parks. In the smaller villages, the Downtown Program's tax credits have helped to support facade improvements,

lifts to make upper floors accessible, sprinklers to increase use of upper floors, and other alterations to bring buildings up to code.

The town of Hardwick, in the rural Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, provides one impressive example of the Downtown Program's impact. Residents of Hardwick wanted to rebuild their downtown after a fire in a key building while at the same time promote a food production network on surrounding rural lands. The burned building was rehabbed using Vermont historic preservation tax credits and matching federal tax credits, as well as the Downtown Program's tax credits for an elevator, sprinkler system, and code compliance measures. The building now houses 14 affordable apartments on the upper floors and, on the ground floor, Claire's, a restaurant specializing in local produce started

About Claire's Restaurant

Here in Hardwick, Claire's restaurant, sort of a clubhouse for farmers, began with investments from its neighbors. It is a Community Supported Restaurant. Fifty investors who put in \$1,000 each will have the money repaid through discounted meals at the restaurant over four years.



"Local ingredients, open to the world," is the motto on restaurant's floor-to-ceiling windows. "There's Charlie who made the bread tonight," Kristina Michelsen, one of four partners, said in a running commentary one night, identifying farmers and producers at various tables. "That's Pete from Pete's Greens. You're eating his tomatoes."

NEW YORK TIMES, OCTOBER 7, 2008
www.nytimes.com/2008/10/08/dining/08verm.html

PHOTO BY GARY HALL

through the support of community investors and the Preservation Trust of Vermont. With widespread state and federal support for Hardwick's entrepreneurial food-based industries and downtown revitalization, the community was able to not only rehabilitate a core property in its historic downtown, providing needed housing and a restaurant to showcase local produce, but also support its rural working landscape by providing facilities for storage, processing, and marketing of food.

The Downtown Program is extremely popular and there are more applications for tax credits than there is money. In 2009 some slight gains were made in available tax credits due to an influx of federal economic stimulus funds. Nevertheless, state funds and staffing levels are shrinking in this recession. In spite of broad support, it remains to be seen what 2010 holds for the Downtown Program.

FRIENDS OF MIDCOAST MAINE

Rural communities that work to revitalize downtowns know that they must be attentive to what happens outside of their town centers as well. The vitality of small downtowns and village centers is continually under threat from commercial and residential sprawl in outlying areas. This pervasive trend alters rural character, undermines traditional industries, and often decreases the supply of affordable housing in small towns. In 1993 and again in 2004, Vermont was declared one of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation due to the threats to its town centers and quality of life from big box development. Rural preservationists know they must be constantly vigilant to ward off intrusions to their small-town way of life.

One area where citizens have taken action to address rural preservation is in midcoast Maine. When the widening of U.S. Route 1 along the coast was proposed about ten years ago, citizens grew alarmed that the highway would harm the many small towns, the scenic vistas, and the abundant natural resources of the region. They banded together to form Friends of Midcoast Maine (FMM) to educate and advocate for healthy downtowns and the preservation of the rural landscape—places under threat from highway development, sprawl, rising land prices, and loss of jobs.

The organization has stated its concerns this way:

Like pearls on a strand, our midcoast towns are unique and perfectly strung along the coast. From village, town, city, and countryside to all the special places in between, Friends of Midcoast Maine is dedicated to promoting the region's prosperity while preserving the qualities that make Maine unique. (from FMM solicitation letter, 2009).

FMM is a small 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with a diverse board of directors representing all parts of the region, a full-time executive director, and a part-time staff planner. FMM covers more than 30 municipalities in Maine from Brunswick in the south to Bucksport in the north along the coast and inland. FMM's modest budget is supported through donations and memberships (35 percent), grants (28 percent), consultation fees (33 percent), and special events (4 percent).

Through FMM, the "grassroots go mainstream," according to Jane Lafleur, FMM's executive director. Lafleur, a professional planner, has many years experience working in small towns and knows

that residents in these towns need help to accomplish their goals. FMM works with residents to link their goals and priorities to resources such as state transportation funding and regional planning assistance. FMM has developed ways to engage the public and bring more voices into the planning process in this rural region.

While FMM doesn't list historic preservation as one of its top priorities, its actions go a long way toward preserving the unique resources of cultural life along the Maine coast. A *Maine, Then and Now* slide show developed in conjunction with the Penobscot Marine Museum has built awareness of the historic resources that still abound in the region and has garnered support to save what they have for the future. Countless workshops and training sessions have helped communities develop the tools for action, including farmland trusts, big-box store size caps, and connected bike and pedestrian paths.

As one example, the town of Lincolnville, Maine, asked for FMM's help in deciding what to do with a historic schoolhouse on a property near the town hall and a fire station. Lafleur encouraged

to rural preservation issues. For example, Camden, Maine, residents were distressed that the state Department of Transportation planned to remove several large trees there while widening Route 1. FMM coordinated a site walk during which concerned citizens and MDOT representatives reviewed each tree; as a result, many of the trees in the historic district were saved.

With a nine-year track record of service to local governments, citizens groups, and grassroots efforts, FMM now stands as a model for how to deliver necessary support services to rural communities in a region with common issues and concerns.

MASSACHUSETTS COMMUNITY PRESERVATION ACT

Like Vermont, the state of Massachusetts has taken an incentive approach to encourage communities to protect open space, preserve historic properties, and provide affordable housing. In 2000 the Massachusetts General Assembly passed the Community Preservation Act (CPA) enabling towns to raise funds by an up-to-3 percent surcharge on the local property tax for protection and provision of community assets. In return, the state agreed to match

these local funds.

The amount of the match has varied.

Initially it was 100 percent of the local revenues raised.

More recently it averaged 40 percent of the local revenues due to the growing number of communities participating and constraints on state income. More than \$330 million in state funds were distributed between 2002 and 2009. During the same period, the number of participating communities grew from 34 to 142, out of a total of 351 municipalities in the state.

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the town to look more broadly at the entire village. She facilitated a visioning session that is now leading to the development of a village center plan. A village blog informs citizens of the plan's progress and invites their participation.

FMM also helps to mediate disputes. Conflict resolution efforts led by skilled professionals can provide valuable answers



With help from Friends of Midcoast Maine, the town of Lincolnville is developing a plan for its village center.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JANE LAFLEUR, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FRIENDS OF MIDCOAST MAINE

To benefit from the state match, cities and towns must annually appropriate at least 10 percent of the fund revenues for acquisitions or initiatives in each of the three priority categories: open space, historic resources, and community housing. Allocations may include funds reserved for projects that are not finalized. The Act promotes public participation by requiring that a local citizens board recommend to the legislative body what the funds should be used for.

A brief survey of expenditures of Community Preservation Act funds by several rural towns¹ in Massachusetts provides a snapshot of the uses of the funds. A clear majority of the funds benefit rural preservation by supporting protection and restoration of historic resources and landscapes, farmland and farm building protection, trail development, historic resource surveys, archival work, rehabilitation of public buildings, and placement of historic markers. For example, the town of Conway used its CPA funds for

cemetery restoration, restoration of the Old Boyden School House, and special signage in the historic district. Southwick's funds matched state and federal funds for farmland preservation and supported a trail network, cultural resources inventory, and rehabilitation of a factory for use as a museum. Dunstable purchased a farm and resold the house and barn with historic preservation restrictions on them; created a picnic area and scenic vista; preserved a historic bridge by providing alternative access for emergency vehicles; and repaired a slate roof on the historic town hall. Although not as frequently listed, affordable housing projects, such as surveys, studies, and organizational development, have also been undertaken in small towns.

The future of the Massachusetts CPA program, however, is not secure. As the number of communities participating in the program grows and as state revenues stagnate due to current economic conditions, communities are no longer getting



At a visioning session facilitated by Friends of Midcoast Maine's executive director, residents of Lincolntonville, Maine, were asked, "What do you envision for Lincolntonville center?" Their answers are ranked by font size in this "wordle" prepared by FMM.

the 100 percent match. In tight economic times such as today's, some communities are questioning whether or not they should maintain their participation in the program. In addition, there are concerns that the program benefits the wealthiest communities that can afford the property tax surcharge and, therefore, shifts state funds away from poorer communities.²

Nevertheless, given the substantial resources the CPA program has brought to historic preservation, open space protection, and affordable housing around the state, it has proved to be an effective initiative. In small towns, where financial resources are scarce and volunteers are relied on for valuable services, the CPA program has enabled many rural preservation projects that otherwise would lack funding to proceed.

These three examples illustrate the types of assistance available from state and regional entities that can make a big difference in rural preservation. Communities like Lincolntonville, Maine; Hardwick, Vt.; and Dunstable, Mass., were able to make some significant progress on village revitalization, historic preservation, and open land conservation with the help of

these programs. Expansion of such programs may be difficult given current economic conditions. There is concern that the cap on tax credits may be lowered due to the stagnant economy in Vermont even in the face of strong demand for funding. Massachusetts is struggling to keep up with its contributions to the CPA program. Regional nonprofits, such as Friends of Midcoast Maine, that rely on active boards and modest budgets and with a clear mission and tools, may provide an enduring solution in some rural areas. **FJ**

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- 1 Becket, Boxford, Conway, Deerfield, Dunstable, Hubbardston, Southwick, Templeton, West Boylston. These communities range in population from 1,801 to 9,571 as of 2008.
- 2 http://www.hks.harvard.edu/rappaport/downloads/cpa/cpa_final.pdf

RESOURCES

Vermont Downtown Program:

www.historicvermont.org/programs/downtown.html
www.ptvermont.org/publications/smartmart.htm
www.ptvermont.org/publications/Home-grownEconomy/sprawl_book.htm
www.smartgrowthvermont.org/help/indicators/
www.smartgrowthvermont.org/learn/downtowns/

Hardwick, Vt., case study:

www.ptvermont.org/CommunitySupportedEnterprises/CommunityRestaurant.pdf

Friends of Midcoast Maine:

www.friendsmidcoast.org

Massachusetts Community Preservation Act:

www.communitypreservation.org
www.commpres.env.state.ma.us/content/cpa.asp
www.hks.harvard.edu/rappaport/downloads/cpa/cpa_final.pdf