Using Small 'd' Democracy to Create Smart Growth in Two New England Towns

Kevin Essington

By Flora Drury '11

Kevin Essington, the Director of Government Relations and Communications for the Nature Conservancy in Rhode Island, discussed local involvement in smart growth decisions. Mr. Essington's presentation focused on the decision making process surrounding the conservation of the Pawcatuck Borderlands, a region that spans 136,000 acres on the Connecticut and Rhode Island border. This region contains one of the biggest undeveloped forests left in New England and one of the cleanest streams in Southern New England, and has therefore been deemed an important forest area to conserve. Conservation is challenging in that a wide range of communities feel a sense of ownership over this ecologically important region; the area spans ten towns, four counties, and two states. In his presentation, Mr. Essington emphasized the importance of stakeholder engagement and collaborative decision- making in conservation projects and described the process as an example of how this type of social engagement can be encouraged and how it can stimulate social change.

Mr. Essington's presentation outlined the process by which community involvement and regional collaboration was encouraged by the organizations working to conserve the Pawcatuck Borderlands. The collaboration of twenty towns located in two states was an imperative component of to this conservation project. In an interview conducted by the Orton Foundation, Essington referred to the project as something that "pushed us beyond the classic land protection paradigm" due to the technology and networking capabilities of the organizations involved. To begin with, a regional conversation regarding this forest's conservation was initiated. At this

discussion, people divided themselves in two camps: one group favored development of the region, and the other group favored conservation. After both groups began talking about the types of conservation and growth they hoped to see, it became evident that both the conservation and development-minded groups favored village-based growth. Essington emphasized the importance of this consensus as it demonstrated that people who at first appear to be on opposing sides of an argument may be, in reality, arguing for the same solution.

Mr. Essington went on to discuss the next step, the Village Innovation Pilot Project, which was designed to provide professional assistance during village-style development planning. The partners behind the Village Innovation Pilot Project were The Nature Conservancy, The Orton Family Foundation, The University of Connecticut, and The Dodson Association. A request for proposals was sent from these partners to towns in the region for support from the Village Innovation Project. Two towns, Exeter, Rhode Island, and Killingly, Connecticut were chosen as pilot towns. Exeter, Rhode Island is a small town, half-owned by the state, which has no real village center. Killingly, Connecticut, on the other hand, is an average sized town with a distressed economy but a good development track record.

Essington's presentation went on to discuss the experiences of pilot teams sent to the two towns picked for the village innovation project. The process of aiding communities in planning development included understanding the heart and soul of the village, conducting baseline assessments and inventory assessments, and finally implementing the development plans that had been settled upon by the local participants. The project is still underway, as collaborative development planning is a time consuming process. From this stage in the project, Mr. Essington learned "it takes a village to make a village."

Mr. Essington mentioned the variety of ways in which pilot teams collected the opinions of community members. Essington emphasized the importance of keypad polling, which allows everyone at a meeting to express their opinion without having to speak in front of the crowd. This provided an even playing field by which outspoken and quiet members of the community could express their opinion. In addition, Essington mentioned that pilot teams solved the problem of low meeting attendance by sending people to different areas in the community and asking strangers a set of questions regarding the conservation of the Pawcatuck Borderlands. Additionally, mail was sent out to residents asking them simple questions regarding what they have done to change their town and what they would like to see changed. This strategy allowed for the pilot teams to gather a wider range of public opinion regarding how the Pawcatuck Borderlands should be conserved.

More creative strategies were developed to provide stakeholders with the opportunity to contribute to development planning in each pilot town. At one meeting, community members were given a map of the town and told that they needed to find a place for a certain number of new homes that must be built within the town's borders. This project was aimed at reminding people that although development is unavoidable, the town has the power to determine where, and in what form, this growth will occur. Groups came up with a variety of development solutions, and once they were done the groups were able to discuss and reflect upon the different options available for the town.

Nearing the end of his discussion, Mr. Essington summarized what he has learned from the Pawcatuck Borderlands Community Involvement Project thus far. To begin with, he emphasized the importance of "going slow to go fast." Mr. Essington learned to prepare for road bumps and stalls when it comes to community development and smart growth planning as

nothing ever goes exactly as planned. Secondly, he discussed how, when working on with local communities, people should expect the unexpected. He provided the example of Paddle Killingly, an event that the town of Killingly began to encourage residents to paddle on the river located in the town and enjoy the beautiful environment that surrounded them. Lastly, Mr. Essington told the audience that this project taught him never to assume people knew what he was talking about. He stressed the importance of getting everyone on the same page, as this decreases confusion and allows for a more productive discussion.

This model for community involvement and collaboration is a promising direction for smart growth if certain criteria are met. To begin with, Mr. Essington emphasized the importance of working in the right place, as certain communities provide a more productive setting for community collaboration than others. Additionally, he discussed the importance of 'embracing the wisdom of crowds'. Lastly, Mr. Essington emphasized the importance of developing broad partnerships to accomplish smart growth as this allows more resources and viewpoints to contribute to the overarching goal. Kevin Essington's talk given left the audience with a sense of hope, as it reminded us that collaborating with our neighbors is an important component of accomplishing a communitygoal.

Resources Viewed:

"The Pawcatuck Borderlands" Powerpoint by Kevin Essington, Director of the Pawcatuck Borderlands Project

http://www.borderlandsproject.org/content/Archives/natural_resources.pdf

The Borderlands Project Website:

http://www.borderlandsproject.org

Reports and Reflections on Innovations in Place by the Orton Foundation: Interview with Kevin Essington

http://www.orton.org/resources/publications/scenarios/summer_2006/kevin_essington

"Pawcatuck Borderlands" Summary by The Nature Conservancy

http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/rhodeisland/placesweprotect/pawcatuck-borderlands.xml

Consensus Building Institute and Public Policy Research Institute. 2005. *The Regional Nature of Land Use: A Situation Assessment of the Pawcatuck Borderlands in Connecticut and Rhode Island*.