

Town of Willsboro Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee

August 14&15, 2009

Community Workshops

Final Report

**Prepared in collaboration with the Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee and Sue Prudhomme,
Citizen Volunteer,**

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Willsboro, New York

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Summary and Purpose

On a Friday evening and Saturday morning in mid-August, the Steering Committee sponsoring the development of the Town of Willsboro Comprehensive Plan hosted two “listening” sessions for the citizenry of Willsboro. The timing and date of the workshops were scheduled to encourage participation by the seasonal as well as year round residents. Two exact versions of the workshop were offered so that optimal attendance might occur.

The purpose of the workshops was to obtain anecdotal information from the general public on natural and cultural conditions existing within the township from the direct sources of its citizens. In order to promote dialogue and expression of concerns about conditions of existing resources, five straw-man questions (attached) were framed by the Steering Committee. As one of several planned methods to collect data and feedback on existing conditions, preferences, issues and concerns of the citizenry, the information from these sessions will be used to help inform the data profiling, indicators, and recommendations made by the Steering Committee.

On Friday Aug. 14th we had twenty-three guest participants and five steering committee/agency representatives. On Saturday Aug. 15th we had thirty-two guests and eight committee/agency representatives.

Methods

Meeting notification efforts included print, cable, web, word of mouth, church notices, direct email and other forms of local advertisement. There never seems to be a sufficient amount of notification or distribution, regardless of the amount provided. The attendees suggested more advertising.

In order to staff the event, the Steering Committee recruited from its membership and volunteer base a group willing to act as scribes and facilitators. Thus, this event also provided an opportunity for the larger volunteer base to aide in the information gathering process. The committee’s advisor conducted two facilitator and scribe trainings so that small group activities met basic training standards (or better), based upon individual facilitators’ experience. Participants were organized in four and six small groups respectively on Friday and Saturday. Overall, there was a significant investment of time and energy by the volunteers both in the training and in the management of the workshops. There was discussion on how to utilize this investment of training and experience for future workshops.

Meeting logistics were arranged by Steering Committee member-volunteers, Bill McClay, Patty Schwennker and George Sayward, who provided for the meeting location and refreshments

respectively. The air conditioning and room arrangements were very complimentary to the meeting mechanics. The refreshments were excellent as was the local cheese.

An hourglass meeting model was employed. Large group followed by intense small group work, then a subsequent “on your feet” activity, culminating in a group keynote was utilized. This process kept volunteer staff and attendees active and moving quickly during and between each section of the activities, while for the participants it enabled intimate dialogue, reflection and opportunity for cross-pollination between social groups that did not normally meet. The feedback from the participants on their experience at the sessions was that the opportunity to speak and to listen was excellent.

Data collection was achieved by the scribes note taking at each table on poster sized post-it note pads. These large notes were then posted on walls around the room, for all participants to read the comments from each table and then participate in the trending exercise. When the small group time was over and all tables’ notes posted a “dot” exercise was employed to determine any trending.

Following the event, all information was transcribed as raw data to an excel spreadsheet by Susan Prudhomme, Citizen Volunteer. Approximately 340 comments were received and compiled. A focused coding method (attached) was applied three times by Marty Stratton, Steering Committee Member and by Ann Holland, Advisor, to the raw data in order to produce 12 themes. The 12 themes were then developed utilizing suggested topics generated by Co-Chair Bill Bardeen (attached) and ones developed by a visioning project of the Orton Family Foundation in Steamboat Springs Colorado.

The results were compiled and presented in a series of charts and tables by Sue Prudhomme, Citizen Volunteer. The data was reviewed by the Steering Committee on September 1st and particularly by the representatives who were present at the Workshops to determine the validity of the representations. The 12 themes were not lumped into smaller categories pursuant to the discussion, but left as separate categories. The Steering Committee agreed to the release of the data in its current form.

Conclusions

Feedback from the community has been very positive about the workshops as evidenced by the comments provided below. In spite of the title, “Listening Sessions,” citizens attending did not expect that they would be the source of information or that the focus would be on the substance of their comments, dialogues and discussions.

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The Listening Sessions served multiple purposes. It provided a forum for the gathering of data, which led to the development of themes, which in turn will serve the Steering Committee's efforts towards a Comprehensive Plan. Another valuable purpose was that the Sessions appear to have enlivened citizen's interest, future participation and realization that they have a voice in their town. The citizens were able to gather information themselves, by hearing the different perspectives from their peers.

Comments from participants:

"Fascinating. This is fascinating." Cindy Pytlak

"There was value of interacting with strangers." Murray Shor

"I have a new way of looking at things." Barb Paye

"It was interesting to see the similar interests, that we are on the same page as a community."
Robin Pierce

"I commend the group. Am gratified that we share the same concern." Laura Smith

"Meeting and structure perfect. Good reinforcement of community spirit." Kathy Reinhardt

"Great process-really great. There are people on the same team: farm, youth, and small town."

"I will take this with me wherever I go." Janice Allen

"Appreciated concerns about the river. Fantastic process for the river." Julie Martin

Attachments:

Agenda and Straw-Man Questions

Co-Chair Bardeen's Themes

Results