

TRUE NORTH

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I am the regional director of New York's Adirondack North Country for the Workforce Development Institute. It is my home, my mission, and my privilege. I was offered this job almost seven years ago by WDI Executive Director Ed Murphy. He wanted to have a person in the Northern region, where there had not been one before. It intrigued me that the job would focus on analyzing what challenges rural New York communities faced in this region, how those problems translated to the rest of the state, and what could be done to assist working families. This is what we do statewide: build strategic partnerships and leverage resources to devise and deliver effective programs. I was instructed to listen, learn, participate, and build relationships.

The Adirondack North Country is the largest region in the state. It consists of seven counties, from Lake Ontario and the Tug Hill through to the St. Lawrence River Valley, and down the Adirondack Coast of Lake Champlain through the Adirondack Park. There is no major population center, only two micropolitan cities, Watertown and Plattsburgh. My friend at St. Lawrence University, Ben Dixon, stated that the region is united in demography but divided by geography. Ben doesn't remember saying it; I credit him anyway.

What I took from this statement was, first, that we have a very large footprint. Travel time is a challenge, with hours separating people from jobs, access to healthcare, or groceries. Second, we

WORKING STORIES

have a sparse population. My colleague, Vivian Benton, likes to remind me that we must all know each other in the North Country (which I, of course, deny. I am sure there are a couple I haven't met). Third, demographics are not on our side. We have an out-migration of people, particularly young people. This means that we are losing population and our young people are leaving. Closely linked with that is the fact that we have more of an aging population than state and national averages. Finally, the North Country is united in demography, with a mostly Caucasian population. We do have some areas of diversity, one being the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe in Akwesasne, an area that spans the Canadian-U.S. border. Others are the university towns, with diverse faculty, staff, and students, and a large military base (Fort Drum) outside Watertown. Demographics present some interesting challenges to cooperation. It is the geography as much as anything that has hindered cooperation, a sense of regional identity, and the efforts to find some common solutions to common problems.

It is fair to say there is no critical shortage of conflict from the United Nations to the local school board. Internationally, nationally, statewide, and locally, positions are taken, jaws set, and heels firmly dug in. Gridlock, as a symptom, sets the stage for almost perpetual conflict. It seems that simply making the effort to speak to those with opposing views is betrayal. Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. Without it, an entire industry of conflict resolution and diplomacy would be out of work. Indeed, democracy, in all its messiness, uses conflict as source material. It can lead to collaboration and to building different, and maybe more effective, partnerships. The key is to tone down the rhetoric, listen, and work to find where areas of agreement exist. It is, of course, much easier said than done. I will examine three efforts that I believe have been important in bridging that geographic divide: the North Country Symposium, the Common Ground Alliance, and the Regional Economic Development Councils.

First, a bit about me, and how I came to be involved in this work. I grew up in this region, on the Canadian border. It is a 45th parallel north, meaning it is equidistant from the equator and the North

Pole. I suppose I was raised straddling two extremes. Like many of the kids I went to school with, my father was a World War II veteran and a blue-collar worker at one of the local plants. He was an industrial electrician and a union steward. My grandfather and his brother worked there at the same plant. They were Canadians who came to work in the States. I was no stranger to grievances, strikes, and picket duty as a means to achieving justice in the workplace. I believe it instilled in me a sense of working for the common good by working together.

I left the state for a time, and eventually moved to Central New York, where I settled down to one of my careers (which lasted 25 years). I worked for a large multinational manufacturer with multiple business units as a machinist and a computer numeric controlled (CNC) machinist. I held numerous positions in production; in the union representing the bargaining unit; and in labor-management committees regarding productivity, work sourcing (insourcing, not outsourcing), and training. The key was to find what topics people could come together on. Quite often, it was difficult. When we set up a labor-management framework for sourcing component manufactured parts, the company looked at it as a way to shift production (and responsibility for that production) out of the plant. The position I took as chair was to bring high-value work with hours (meaning jobs) and investment into the shop. What the company and union agreed to was a method to justify a temporary or permanent outsourcing of a component if we could balance it with a component brought in. On the labor side, we also agreed to engage in a process to justify machine tool purchasing.

Now, this type of approach was not universally embraced (by the company or bargaining unit) and it took a great deal of communication to build some degree of mutual trust. I used the same approach in areas of job evaluation and training. There was interest on the part of the company to combine job codes to gain flexibility. I worked to gain pay upgrades and training for affected workers as fair exchange.

My wide variety of interests led me to pursue education. I earned an Associate's and then a Bachelor's in Business Administration, and

WORKING STORIES

finally a Master's Degree in Labor and Policy Studies, all while balancing a full-time (and overtime) regular job, union responsibilities, and my family, in addition to schoolwork. This seems crazy, but I did spread it over 10 years. What really drove me was a desire to balance what I knew in the "real" world with formal education and survival. I wanted to have that degree so that, in case something happened with my job, I would have a backup plan. The economy was shedding manufacturing jobs in droves, as companies sent jobs offshore. One company after another in Central New York followed that pattern. Mine finally followed suit, closing the production business units in 2003. We were told that we could work for free and still not be competitive with workers in Asia. The loss of these well-paying blue-collar jobs was devastating to the economy and to thousands of families.

I was called into a meeting one day at the local building-trade counterpart to my manufacturing union. I was asked to develop a residential heating, air conditioning, and ventilation program. The challenge was to build a program from scratch and make it compatible with the local union. The target audience was dislocated workers among those losing their jobs with real manufacturers. I am forever grateful for the confidence the international and the local leadership had in me to offer such an opportunity. It was quite a challenge, with a lab to build, equipment and tools to obtain, a curriculum (lesson plans and labs) to develop, and all the approvals and certificates to get. I was the lead instructor and program coordinator. We graduated four classes in an approved 16-week offering, where participants earned industry-recognized credentials. Unfortunately, we ran out of students and were unable to keep teaching the class. I went to work as the HVAC instructor at Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), and eventually as the service manager at a local HVAC manufacturer.

I moved back to the North Country, and was offered this job in workforce development. This job engages and motivates me every day to better understand the opportunities and challenges facing rural New York, and this region in particular. I began to meet with people and participate, and support efforts to do just that. I supported our

organization's mission by joining committees and sponsoring events, training, and studies in manufacturing, energy efficiency, economic development, biomass, healthcare, and community.

North Country Symposium

The focus of the North Country Symposium has been understanding economic and environmental challenges to the North Country, as well as the relationship to education and community. It is one of the critical events that brings people together and points the way toward wider conversation and cooperation.

St. Lawrence County is the geographic center of the region, and a study in bewildering contrasts. This big county has natural resources, and five universities and colleges, but also some of the highest unemployment and poverty rates in the state. Industrial closures and the loss of private-sector jobs, along with population decline, have been trends. The Burt family, St. Lawrence University alumni, wanted to make an effort to address this. The Burt Symposium was made possible through a generous endowment by the Burt family, and St. Lawrence University has been hosting it since 2003. The event brings together people from academia, government, community, and environmental groups to explore a specific area.

Previous symposia have explored ways to build sustainable local economies and communities. They have been ahead of their time on some topics. For example, how the local foods movement and building value-added agriculture can provide great opportunity to rural counties. This is not revolutionary today, but was a new approach at the time. There are still those who do not place value in any agriculture other than big dairy and commodities. When it was first presented in a symposium, what was being done in Vermont was eye-opening. Many asked why we couldn't do it in Northern New York. The concept of creating sustainable growth (the keynote set by WDI's Ed Murphy) by utilizing retention strategies and developing a community foundation is a new idea. Furthermore, the challenges facing rural education, consolidation, and demography were hotly examined, and continue to be, up to the present.

WORKING STORIES

What defines the work of the Symposium is the grassroots organizing that comes out of it. There have been working groups (Action Teams) that have developed from breakout sessions. These groups have a range of participants and are willing to keep the topics going throughout the year. For example, the work of the Energy Task Force, which I am on, has addressed local issues, from energy efficiency to alternative energy to waste reduction. There has been work done that helped feed into the North Country Energy conferences. Work by other work groups helped supply information and best practices to the North Country Strategic Plan when it needed to be written.

The Adirondacks

I grew up in and around the Adirondacks, and witnessed an example of the economic divide firsthand. Communities that bordered the Adirondack Park had greater flexibility in land usage, and seemed to do better. Business and industry often had better options for development. Even as a youngster I could tell the difference, as some communities struggled and others didn't.

I know of one effort in the Adirondacks where a wide range of participants began a concerted effort over a number of years to try and build a model of collaboration. One big question since the creation of the Park in 1892 is how to balance the needs, concerns, and protections of the natural environment with the human-built environment. Where do people work and what kind of work do they do living in and around the Park? The conflict between the level of protection and development was a logical outcome, with people coming to the discussion with a wide range of experiences and perspectives on the issue. The chasm between use and protection has been wide and entrenched, with both sides looking to win.

We have very visible evidence in cities where companies abandoned their downtown facilities and left them boarded up and turning into crumbling remnants of factories and warehouses. It is a downward spiral of disinvestment and eroding tax base. What happens in rural communities when work disappears?

I remember going on a family car trip cross country when I was a child. We went through parts of the West where deserted towns were crumbling into the prairie. I thought then that the “ghost town” was a fascinating place. Today, I wonder about the lives of the people and what became of them.

What has become very interesting to me is the effort to find a path of compromise that enables people with divergent views to work together for the common good. What the Common Ground Alliance began eight years ago was an attempt to get people from across the Adirondacks under one big tent to begin the process. The different parties had battled in courts, hearings, in the press, and in public forums for many years. How has this process changed the approach to development, jobs, the economy, and the environment? How did these folks do it?

There are tourism folk, environmental groups, and economic developers in conflict over rails or trails. You get the picture. The Adirondack Park Agency Chair at the time, Ross Whaley, stated famously that “Adirondackers would rather fight than win.” It did become very apparent that problems affecting the Adirondacks were serious challenges to the future of the area in both the natural and built environments. Acid rain insidiously lowered the pH of Adirondack lakes and increased mercury and other contaminants from coal-burning plants in the Midwest. Climate change is a real threat to Adirondack ecosystems, as well as to a winter-based recreation economy. A long list of invasive species poses a threat to the forests and lakes. Crumbling infrastructure and declining communities make the region less likely to attract visitors and new residents. Compounding this was the lack of broadband and other amenities. The world was bypassing the Adirondacks, and a real question was being posed: How much longer could this go on?

Finding Common Ground

Three people got together for coffee in the early 2000s. One of them led an environmental group, the second was an elected town supervisor, and the third was executive director of a community action

WORKING STORIES

group. These folks regularly looked at problems from very different perspectives, but one of them put a paper on the table with three words written on it: Community, Economy, and Environment. This began a process concerning how to get people talking with each other on issues that were critical to all. In this case, the common denominator was the dire situation of the region. As mentioned, there were the threats to the environment (such as climate change, acid rain, and invasive species), the community (infrastructure, housing, transportation) and economy (broadband, main street decay, healthcare).

The three people brought more participants to the table and formed a public-private grassroots organization called the Common Ground Alliance. They authored a document entitled “A Blueprint for the Blue Line.” They established collaboration between state and local governments, non-profit organizations, stakeholders, and residents of the Park, all participating as equals. Brian Houseal, Executive Director of the Adirondack Council at the time, said: “We work to recognize the common good of the communities, residents, and resources of the Adirondack Park, not to further specific organizational, institutional, or individual agendas.” It was also agreed that all participants would be reminded to leave “Axes, Egos, Agendas, and Logos” at the door. The Blueprint was written by a core group of volunteers, and was the centerpiece of the first Common Ground meeting in Long Lake in July 2007. The 149 attendees discussed, debated, and revised the document, highlighting 12 major points. They included two additional items of property taxes and healthcare. In each point, a rationale was included on that particular challenge and the potential actions that could be taken.

Houseal said that establishing a framework to analyze problems and set some process to solve them was one aspect of the Common Ground Alliance. Another was to establish trust, and that was going to take time. Over the next few years, the group did some remarkable things to raise attention. Perhaps for the first time, the group was able to speak with a unified voice to the government in Albany and Washington. The Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages released an important work on what was happening to communities within

the Blue Line, those lands protected by state constitution as “forever wild.” “Conferences were held and action plans were devised to address climate change. Attention was given to the impact climate change would be to winter recreation-based tourism. An Adirondacks group went to Albany for a showing, set up for legislators and state agencies, of the Wild Center’s climate film *A Matter of Degrees*. High-speed telecommunication build-out was acknowledged to be as important to rural communities as electrification or telephone was in decades past. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 got the ball rolling by releasing critical funding to begin the process in the Adirondacks.

What would be the next steps? If point by point in the “Blueprint” were worked on by dedicated volunteers, what was the overall goal? There was an opportunity for some strategic planning of what kind of Adirondacks people would like to live in. Stay tuned.

Regional Councils

Economic, workforce, and community development have each existed in separate worlds in our region. Communities and counties were often in competition for scarce resources. Regional cooperation was limited or non-existent. If there was a success in one area, it was viewed as a zero-sum game. Part of this can be attributed to geography (again!). The region has areas that have worked to carve out a recognized “brand.” The Adirondacks (High Peaks, Olympics); Watertown, as Drum Country for Fort Drum; the Thousand Islands, with the Seaway Valley and Plattsburgh (Adirondack Coast, Montreal’s American Suburb). There were plenty of places that were left out, as some had the ability to apply for and administer grants, and others did not.

Previous efforts didn’t help foster a North Country identity. North-south configuration seemed to build on some previous partnerships and made some sense. Plattsburgh was aligned, in some degree, with the Capital Region (with Interstate 87 Montreal to New York City) and an emphasis on technology. It was referred to as Tech Valley, Watertown (the other micropolitan city) was more aligned

WORKING STORIES

with Syracuse, following Interstate 81 in what is called the “Creative Core.” The State didn’t exactly help, as some agencies didn’t follow the “footprint” on what each part of the region was. What counties were in what region and where do you apply for funding?

With his election, Governor Andrew Cuomo sought to change the structure of economic development in New York State. The opportunity for economic development funding and projects would rest with how well the region came together. Two co-chairs for each region were chosen, along with business, government, academia, and labor members appointed to the Council. The Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) area would be the east-west configuration and resemble (sort of) the Departments of Labor and Empire State Development footprints. A majority of the Adirondack Park would be in the North Country, with some parts in the Mohawk Valley and Capital regions.

The first step was for counties and communities to create a strategic plan. There were plans galore, from County Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) to tourism plans to sub-region plans, but nothing defining the entire region. The strategic plan process brought many people into the work that previously had not worked together or been offered a chance to engage. This includes me and the WDI, as I worked on the Workforce Strategy. We and other region-wide organizations, such as the Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA), brought experience in understanding what was happening on the ground. The groups and subgroups worked on their parts independently and *pro bono*. It was a remarkable project that came up with a uniquely North Country approach that positively addressed the opportunities and assets, without ignoring the barriers.

A statewide pot of funding was scooped together and made available to regions, with additional money going to those that linked development projects with the regional strategy. They won “Best Plan” designation. The applications (Consolidated Funding Applications) were reviewed and ranked, and the regional folks were able to add points to applications they felt reflected regional priorities. So, here is the interesting thing. Despite the real and perceived problems with

this process, it worked on a number of levels. First of all, it brought a regional strategy to a scattered region (geography again?). People understood that the key to success or failure rested on forging new partnerships. Second, it democratized the process. I heard in the first year some grumbling from experienced economic developers that the REDC process was overly influenced by “well-meaning amateurs.” If that was true, it was a good thing. It brought interesting, and perhaps non-traditional, projects forward for consideration from all corners of the region. Third, it became a framework for other community development and environmental funding. Through the CFA process, funding for the Opportunity Agenda and Cleaner, Greener Communities was awarded. Lastly, an atmosphere of competition in the region made good applications better and more aligned with the regional strategy. The regions were also in competition for “Best Plan” for those additional dollars.

Conclusion

I have learned an incredible amount over the past seven years about this region and the people who call it home. I propose some of my closing comments apply to other rural communities across the state. First, regarding geography, it doesn't necessarily have to be something that divides. For example, there has been a great effort made by the Federal and State governments to close the digital divide. The access to high-speed, reliable broadband infrastructure has connected people, business, and needed services. It is as fundamentally important to rural communities as roads, electrification, and telephone. It shrinks the distances. WDI worked with our partners at Cornell Cooperative Extension to deliver, across rural counties in the state, a training program for women working in agriculture. They had access to high-quality training that was shared to remote locations. I have regular board meetings with organizations that are in Central New York and the Southern Tier. The technology is here and readily available.

Demography is not destiny. That phrase comes from a work on societal aging by Robert Friedland and Laura Summer. With regard

WORKING STORIES

to our rural Adirondacks North Country, I take the phrase to mean this: take assessment of the changes and commit to them, reverse, or change course. Certainly easier said than done, but not impossible. For example, we have held diversity summits over the last couple of years. Many in the Adirondacks have acknowledged that the region must be more welcoming to people of color and the LGBTQ community. Visitors, and how visitors want to experience our region, have changed as society has changed. People want a welcoming and safe place to explore, and (hopefully) to return to or tell their friends about. Embrace it.

Another issue, the retention and attraction of young people to our region, has its own challenge. Our universities and colleges bring a wonderfully diverse population of students (and faculty), but it is difficult to keep them without employment opportunities. I believe that the regional councils and the expanded approach to economic and community development are a good start to the integrated approach to sustainable communities. This past year, WDI funded work with the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe around Cultural Tourism. This effort is a way to showcase the cultural identity of our native craftspeople and artisans in a way that engages them actively with surrounding communities and visitors. This is obviously good for the Tribe, as a destination for visitors, but also for the region, to have such an important, enriching asset to share their culture and rich history with others, and it will be on their terms.

Finally, in searching for common ground, the examples I presented are action-based, stemming from serious threats. Problems are like conflict, coming in all shapes and sizes. Brian Houseal said that the Common Ground approach was a great example that could be replicated. I agree. It was difficult to lower the volume, and establish some trust and mutual respect, but it worked. A similarity between the Symposium, Common Ground, and the Regional Council is the grassroots approach. Groups coming out of the Symposium are citizen-based, and work on issues that come out of the yearly event. They take action and report ongoing activity. People have taken the structure and organized around it. The Common Ground

Alliance operates along the same lines, with people volunteering time and talent to push the solutions and policy that can change the demography. Lastly, the REDC came together, and people began to truly act more regionally.

I believe that this important discovery by a majority of Adirondack stakeholders has fueled closer and more coordinated efforts. In tourism, for example, a major initiative called the Adirondack Park Recreation Strategy was unveiled at a Local Government Day Conference that links the natural assets and the nearby community. I was walking out of that event with members of the Department of Environmental Conservation, and they were very encouraged by so many people talking about “our Park,” and wanting to work more regionally. An Adirondack non-profit summit was held to highlight the economic impact of a number of those organizations in the Park. The Adirondacks are developing an economic development strategy, with clear, interrelated steps to get it done.

By no means have we become a strife-free zone, especially among committed and impassioned people. (There is still some sitting around campfires, though.) Organizations, government, and groups will dig their heels in when guiding principles and values dictate. In most cases, it is the tenor that has changed. This method of working together is certainly grassroots. That disclaimer is made at different meetings, and it welcomes in all stakeholders on all levels. People are engaging with state agencies more as partners, less as opponents. The level of trust and personal contact had to be established. This took time. It is important not to get too far ahead of the people. Some elected officials lost their positions as a result of their work with and on Common Ground Alliance projects. What the Alliance did that was critical was that it got people talking to decision-makers with one voice and reading from the same page.