

Part 1 - Process Overview and First Stage

Process and Results

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Part 1: Process Overview and First Stage Process

Intent and Process

The process to develop the Vision for the Town and Village of Oxford was specifically designed with the intent to engage the broad range of residents and other stakeholders in the Town and Village. On May 14th, 2012 a group of community leaders were brought together with the intent to develop the process and to guide the vision plan development. This committee was to also be responsible for outreach for all of the three workshops. The vision planning team included students in the SUNY ESF Department of Landscape Architecture Community Design and Research. Fliers for the workshops were provided by the SUNY ESF planning team and then distributed by the Advisory Committee to community locations. The workshops were also advertised on the Town/Village websites as well as the local daily and weekly newspaper.

1. During the first stage community strengths, character areas, sacred places, concerns and underutilized potential were documented and confirmed. Through analysis of this data, preliminary goals and graphic representations of the community data were developed.

2. During the second stage draft vision statement and goals were reviewed and revised by community members at the second workshop. Participants were involved in addressing concerns and exploring better underutilization of resources. The following topics and areas emerged as priorities:

- Care and maintenance practices
- Downtown Core
- Route 12 corridor
- The Chenango River corridor

3. In the final stage the planning team worked closely with the community to prioritize short term and long term action strategies. The project team developed specific design study recommendations around priority issues of the Downtown Core, the Route 12 corridor and the Chenango River corridor based on the community data from the second stage. These were presented and discussed at the final workshop.

First Stage Process and Results

Following are summaries of the workshop held with community stakeholders during the first stage. Posters depicting many of these results follow the text. The presentation at the beginning of the second workshop also documents the results of the first stage.

A series of questions were asked during the first stage:

- What are the strengths of Oxford?
- What are the Character Areas in the Town and Village?
- What are areas of concern?
- What are the Sacred Places?
- What are places of underutilized potential?
- How do you want to be able to describe Oxford 10 years from now?

Workshop One Organization

The first workshop was held in the Oxford primary school's multi-purpose room on June, 5th 2012 from 3-5 pm and 7-9 pm. Approximately 25 participants were in attendance. We also held focus groups in the early afternoon on the same day from 11-12 and again from 12-1. There were three focus groups: Business Owners (9 participants), Non-profits and institutions (8 participants) and Agriculture (3 participants). Individual interviews with School Superintendent and Veterans Home administrator took place on June 22nd 2012. The purpose of the first workshop was to gain a better understanding of how community members use and value Oxford and its surrounding, to identify community assets, opportunities and concerns.

Focus Groups

1. Business Owners:

The discussion with the business owners showed that there are a range of businesses in the village and town. Those with a physical presence can be seen primarily in the village core or on Route 12 leading into the village. Not as evident are the number of home businesses located off of the main roads and also the internet businesses that are starting to emerge.

The businesses in the Town and Village have a mix of clientele and draw from several markets. This is reinforced by what community members documented in the first workshop:

- Some businesses attract local traffic for daily needs
- Some "hub" businesses draw customers from outlying areas
- Some businesses draw customers from distant areas

The business owners present felt that Oxford is a good place to do business because it is a small town. To them "small town" implies:

- Trust and safety
- Helpful service because they know you
- Familiarity and comfort
- Sense of community

When asked about the challenges to doing business in Oxford there were a number of issues that emerged:

- Flooding is a concern for property owners in the flood zone as well as those whose businesses are affected by flooding's disruption to roads and services. Properties that get flooded repeatedly will lose value and may not be worth repairing. River flooding affects the business district, flooding from hills affects residential properties in the northeast section of the village.
- Big box stores offer a wider variety at lower prices, however several people expressed dissatisfaction with what you give up.
- Fracking was raised as a challenge but there was no followup discussion
- Loss of jobs – does the bad economy impact smaller communities more or less?

- Loss of grocery – some discussion about why the grocery closed; some said it was mismanaged
- Generation change – next generation might not want or be able to continue business
- Larger farms – fewer families means fewer services needed and goods purchased

Participants felt that the loss of larger business in the region and changes to family farms have had the most significant impact on loss of local jobs and decline in local business. It was clear that being a small town is one of the community's greatest strengths.

- In response to question about what might be done to improve the economy, several themes came out:
 - Natural resource related businesses:
 - Forest industries
 - Specialty farms
 - Natural Gas/Fracking
 - Cultural Asset based businesses:
 - Railroad rejuvenation or rails to trails
 - Historical trails and resources that could include:
 - Old homes and public buildings
 - Underground railroad
 - Cemeteries
 - New Businesses to complement the local businesses and character desired by some participants:
 - Environmentally friendly industry
 - Weatherization, solar, wind, green construction
 - More specialty farming
 - Necessity stores – grocery, bakery, butcher

2. Non-profit

In the discussion among the organization representatives, the main challenge that emerged was reinforcing a sense of community and keeping people engaged. Much of what came out from this discussion were their own brainstormed recommendations on how to be more effective collectively in helping to ensure oxford's continued strength as a caring and connected community.

Non-profits, Service Clubs and Organizations

- Create awareness of what they are doing
- Seek funding to support the local economy
- Promote new economic initiatives
- Get more people involved and volunteering
- Get young people involved and bridge gap between generations
- Overcome time pressures that prevent participation
- Collaborate to achieve goals and provide services

Big issues:

- Maintaining a strong sense of community
- Challenge of keeping people engaged – many time pressures
- “Go to people” involved in multiple organizations
- Continued need for resources

3. Agriculture

Three farmers were able to take time out of their busy schedules to share the issues they face, how farming is changing and ideas for the future of farming in Oxford. The farmers also came up with ways that farming could be strengthened and supported, and ways that agriculture could continue to be an economic driver in the Oxford community.

Agriculture has changed in the past 25 years.

- In the 1960’s there was a change from canned milk to bulk milk
- There has been improved quality in milk products – due to stricter regulations, better cooling technology and customer demand
- There has been a decrease in the number of farms – due to farmers aging, increase in land value versus a flat product value, pressure to sell land to developers, and no new dairy start ups
- Youth are encouraged to follow other opportunities but recently youth are wanting to farm again
- Influx of urbanites since 9/11
- Farmers used to organize and cooperate more

The farmers believe that farming remains a significant economic driver in Oxford.

- It is the main production activity and largest economic engine
- The most tax dollars come from local agricultural land
- Other businesses depend on agricultural activity (which was reinforced by business focus group)

The farmers suggested ways that farming could be strengthened and supported, and ways that agriculture could continue to be an economic driver in the Oxford community.

- Small local farms and startups can help keep money and jobs local. Support through:
 - favorable tax structure,
 - Cornell Cooperative Extension
 - farmers markets
 - Protect farmland from development
 - Communication with community and organizations
- Complementary business/industry opportunities
- Accessible suppliers
- Collaboration among farmers
- Connect young people to farming opportunities

Community Survey

After the first workshop the project team developed a survey that was directed toward community members who were not able to attend the workshops. Survey forms were available online through survey monkey and in hardcopy form at the post office and Village Hall for community members to give their responses. 64 people filled out the surveys. The responses to the survey are summarized and included at the end of this section.

Workshop 1 Activities and Results

Following is a description of the workshop 1 activities and a brief summary of the results. Posters illustrating the information and findings are included at the end of this section.

Photo Surveys

A couple of weeks prior to the workshop, photo surveys were distributed to community volunteers. Each volunteer was asked to take pictures of different views of Oxford in response to a set of questions on the survey. These surveys and digital images were returned to the CCDR prior to the workshop and the photos were formatted on posters for review at the workshop.

As an entrance activity at the workshop, participants selected the photos from each question that they most agreed with and marked it with a dot. They noted the photo number and the reason why they chose it on the survey sheet. The posters and selections are included at the end of this section. Following are the primary selections for each question:

Results: Major Themes ranked in both the Village and Town:

- 1. Natural Beauty of the Community: The Chenango River is a beautiful part of Oxford's natural landscape and an important component of its history.*
- 2. Important community Gathering space: Lafayette Park*
- 3. Primary Entrance or Gateway into the Village: Lafayette Park and Cole Fountain is eye catching and beautiful.*
- 4. Unique character to the village: The stone Greenmen carved on the old bank building's façade is historic and is a relic of Oxford's heyday.*
- 5. Historic character: Library and the Bank building (now the village and town offices)*
- 6. Sacred or Cherished Places: Oxford Middle School and Cole Fountain*
- 7. Economic Vitality: Hoppies*
- 8. Favorite Street in the community: Greene St extension (Washington Park)*
- 9. Favorite public recreation: Little League Field, Boname Park*
- 10. Underutilized potential in the Village: Gazebo in Washington Park*
- 11. Underutilized potential in the Town: Boname Park and pavilions, and railroad tracks*

Introductions and Strengths

Participants introduced themselves then shared and mapped a strength that they identified about Oxford on their entry survey.

Results: Most of the strengths are related to the social and cultural aspects of the community:

- Oxford is a clean, safe and secure place to live*
- Strong sense of community*

- *Strong and active leadership*
- *Friendly people*

Strengths also include the physical environment, that it is beautiful and rural

Activity One Map Orientation/ Districts and Character Areas

The purpose was to orient community members to aerial maps and image of Oxford as well as to understand what the community thinks of itself and what community members think are important characteristics of the areas of Oxford.

Results: Image or character areas were defined by participants to help the project team understand how community members define and describe physical areas in the town and village. Most of the areas and places people chose to outline and identify are in the village with very few areas identified in the rural areas of the town.

Activity Two Patterns of Use

In this activity participants documented the places they go on a regular basis, categorized on a time scale of daily, weekly, monthly, several times a year and why they go there. The purpose is to identify, map and understand the patterns of use and movement throughout the Town and Village of Oxford. We want to understand the range and types of places that you have in the community and their rhythm of use and which places are visited most frequently by residents. We also wanted to understand what participants go outside of Oxford for.

Results: There is a large amount of in-depth information documented on the poster. Major findings include:

- *Rhythms and patterns of use vary by the type of business and services provided. Bartles was the most frequently mentioned business but most people visit there on a monthly basis. Second was the most office, with most people going on a daily basis. NBT Bank, Hoppies and the Library were mentioned the next most frequently but each has a different pattern of use. Three of the top seven places that participants visit most often are restaurants. Understanding the activity patterns related to different types of businesses and services is the first step in developing a marketing strategy for new businesses.*
- *Most of the places mentioned are clustered in the downtown core. This has planning and design implications, and also provides a synergy for other new uses.*
- *Norwich is the place that participants most frequently go outside of Oxford, for a mix of reasons. Specific mention is made of Price Chopper, Walmart, and Lowes, which are at a different scale than anything present in Oxford.*
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When asked about desired new uses, a grocery predominates by far, but many community members are thinking outside of the big box on this. The overall desired patterns identified were:

- *Grocery - Desire to have food items in Oxford*
- *Fresh local products*
- *Deli, meat, vegetables*

- *Bakery*
- *Nightly entertainment, additional restaurants*
- *Keep money in Oxford*
- *Better pedestrian connections - Many people suggested that walking could be made more enjoyable with continuous sidewalks, improved sidewalk conditions and more trails*
- *Survey had additional results that expand on local services*

Activity Three Sacred Places, Concerns, Underutilized Resources

Sacred Places

Sacred places are felt to be important and valued by the community, to which they feel a sense of connection, pride and ownership. They were described as places in a community that are highly valued and meaningful to community members, that they would like to protect, and pass on to future generations. Individually or in pairs, participants wrote down on the handout sheet the places that they consider sacred and the reason why. As a group, the sacred places within Oxford were located and marked with a numbered with a blue dot onto a large aerial map. A corresponding list of places and reason they were considered sacred was documented.

Results: The sacred places were valued for a variety of reasons: historic character, architecture, economic vitality, natural beauty, central location, recreation and some because they are community gathering spaces. The top sacred places in Oxford according to the data from workshop one:

1. *Middle School*
2. *Lafayette Square*
3. *Historic buildings*
4. *Library*
5. *Post Office*
6. *Bank building*
7. *Railroad Depot*
8. *The Chenango River*

Areas of Concern

The same procedure was followed for identifying areas of concern except that red dots were used to distinguish these areas from the sacred places. The purpose is to identify and, where appropriate, map general concerns to understand which concerns are most prominent in the Oxford community and which issues the community may need to address.

Results: The major areas of concern ranked:

1. *Condition and maintenance of properties*
2. *Vacant buildings and lots*
3. *Sidewalks*
4. *Economic conditions and lack of opportunity*
5. *Environmental conditions and underutilized resources.*

Underutilized Resources

Underutilized resources are resources, place, people and spaces in the community which are not currently being used to their potential and may provide greater benefits if better utilized. The participants were asked to identify underutilized resources, share them with group and if applicable label them with a numbered yellow dot sticker on the map corresponding to the place as well as recording the underutilized place on the flip chart with the corresponding number. In this activity we sought to understand the potential opportunities and why they are underutilized.

Results: The most frequently identified underutilized resources:

1. *Boname Park*
2. *The Chenango River*
3. *Sidewalks*
4. *Youth*
5. *the Railroad*
6. *People and human resources*
7. *Empty storefronts*
8. *The Finger Lakes trail.*

It's also valuable to get a sense of the underlying reasons how better utilization might add to the overall vitality of the community. In this case there are four major reasons described: recreation, economic development, physical connections and social capital. Some resources identified fit in one or more of these categories. How underutilized resources are better utilized should contribute to achieving the vision and goals.

Activity Four Looking Ahead

Describe Oxford in 10 Years? What would make you want to stay?

1. *Stronger economy*
More jobs
Varied businesses
Vibrant business district
Better use of underutilized resources
2. *Improved/maintained built environment*
Clean and well maintained
Historic building restored/preserved
Improve business district
3. *Continued strong community ties*
Retain younger people and attract families
Tight knit community

Synthesis

Based on the analysis and synthesis of the first stage data, broad topical themes emerged for the primary goals which would provide the framework for the vision plan. These themes were reviewed as part of the first stage results presented and discussed during Workshop 2.

- 1. Economic issues are driving many aspects of the community view of the present and the future. Loss of a range of jobs in local manufacturing and loss of small and family farms have contributed to unemployment, population loss, fewer opportunities for young adults and decline in local business activity.*
- 2. The “sense of community” is weakening and needs to be reinvigorated and strengthened. There are many community organizations but not as many people volunteering or participating. Time pressure is listed as the top reason for this change.*
- 3. The lack of care and unmaintained appearance of some properties are shared concerns and may be signs of the other issues. The poor condition of some historic properties is especially disturbing. Vacant buildings and site are also concerns.*
- 4. The rural countryside and the denser village are integrally related. What happens in one impacts the other. This is most obvious with the change in the number and types of farms and agricultural practices, and how that affects the economy of the village. It is also evident in natural systems (such as the river), infrastructure (such as roads and traffic), development patterns and social relationships. While understood by many, how the relationship between the village and countryside is respected and how decisions are made will determine the future of both. The upcoming decisions about hydrofracking will be a major test of relationships. The Vision Plan should provide the foundation and tools for values based decisions.*
- 5. The Oxford community cares deeply about providing opportunities for children and youth. This shows in the concern expressed for their future and the quality of its schools. Many of the youth are leaving and taking with them their energy, optimism and talents, and the investment of the community.*
- 6. There are built and natural systems and places that were identified as concerns, but that may also be viewed as resources and opportunities that can contribute positively to the future of Oxford in reconsidered. This includes Route 12, the Chenango River, the Railroad, Boname Park, Lake Gerry, the village core, and historic structures.*

What was not clear after Stage One

Most of the responses and activity results were focused on the village and close in areas. We did not get a clear understanding of how people in the community think or feel about the more rural parts of the town, what we have started to refer to as the “countryside”. It is important that the Oxford community attempt to describe or create shared values about both the village and the countryside, and understand your differences and reasons why.