



## **Unity as a Destination Phase 1 Summary Report**

### **Overview**

GrowSmart Maine was invited to speak with the Unity Economic Development Committee (EDC) in December of 2016 about the Making Headway in Your Community Program and its potential fit with the town's interest in economic and community development through becoming a destination. This concept has been a recurring theme in recent community building programs and has broad community support. In the following weeks, the EDC and GSM developed a strategy for engaging the whole community around how to make Unity a destination. The event "Food, Conversation, and the Future of Unity" was convened on Sunday February 19<sup>th</sup> at the Unity College Center for the Performing Arts. Despite postponing the event once due to snow and the fact that it was a sunny Sunday on a holiday weekend at the beginning of February school vacation, there was strong turnout of about 60 people from the community.

The program of engagement was designed by the EDC. Staffing for the event was coordinated by GrowSmart Maine (GSM). The full group discussion was lead and facilitated by Nancy Smith of GSM. Tyler Kidder, also of GSM, greeted late arrivals, took photographs, provided small group facilitation, and assisted in synthesizing the large ideas and the voting process. Two outside facilitators with experience in community process, Lorain Francis and Brianna Bebb, greeted attendees, took notes during the full group and small group discussions and reported out for their small groups.

There was an hour for socializing, eating lunch, and answering two questions on large post-it notes that were then adhered to the wall. Full transcription of the post-it notes and all notes taken during the meeting are available upon request from Unity EDC or GrowSmart Maine.

People were asked to write and post their responses to these two questions:

1. What do you value most about Unity?
2. What do you most wish Unity had that it lacks?

After the social hour the facilitated whole group discussion consisted of a series of questions:

- What is a destination and what attracts you to a place?
- How would Unity benefit from becoming a destination?

- What must be preserved or avoided if Unity becomes a destination?

The group then divided into four small groups according to color of their nametag. These small groups gathered in different spaces in the building and were tasked with generating ideas on how to move Unity forward toward being a destination. Each group had a facilitator keeping time and scribing.

Attendees then reconvened as a large group and the facilitator for each reported out on the ideas. Nancy, with help from the attendees, highlighted 12 prominent project ideas, which were then written on the white board. Three green and three pink adhesive dots were passed out and community members were invited up to the board to show their support for the ideas. Green dots signaled they thought the idea was a great idea and pink dots were to show they were willing to work on moving an idea forward. Multiple dots could not be put on any one idea and people did not have to use all their dots.

The green and pink dot votes were then tallied up on the board for all to see. The idea for investigating lodging needs and opportunities (including a campground, sporting lodge, and inn) clearly had the most support with 24 'great idea' votes and 10 'I will work on this' votes. Exploring using the lake as a destination, from recreation to research and improving the water quality, received the second highest number of votes, 18/11. Nancy invited people to self-select into project groups around these and other top ideas. Based on the energy and people in the room, six project groups were formed. Each group has a volunteer leader, an EDC liaison, and has been provided with each other's email addresses and a guide for putting together a project presentation at the follow-up event.

## Highlights

### Question 1: What do you most value about Unity?

Five main themes emerged from responses to this question that attendees wrote on post-it notes as they arrived and posted on the wall. Here are the themes ordered with the highest number of responses to the lowest:

1. Small town vibe, community, culture, and good people
2. Local institutions especially Unity College and MOFGA
3. Farms, natural environment, trails, and sustainability
4. Type and culture of local businesses
5. Geographical Location and proximity

### Question 2: What do you most wish Unity had that it lacks?

Six themes emerged from the cluster of post-it notes for this question. The themes below are ordered from highest number of responses to lowest:

1. More food options: Restaurants, bakery, deli, farmers' market, local/farm-to-table connection
2. Increased downtown/village vibrancy: sidewalks, support for aging in place, beautification, safety, access to services, integration with the college, community hub
3. Lodging: Motel, Inn, Housing
4. Specific new businesses other than food and lodging: café, coffee shop, book store, gift shop, auto parts store, or a combination business that covers multiple needs
5. Clear collaboration & communications among entities and a Unity brand/identity
6. More support & infrastructure for recreation: Raceway, ATV trails, Field of Dreams

**Question 3: What is a destination & what attracts you to a place?**

The full group contributed answers verbally to these three next questions and answers were written on flipcharts.

Four characteristics of a destination emerged from the responses and some specific responses are included under each characteristic:

1. Things to do or see; Location/Geography
  - a. History
  - b. Outdoor activities, trails, biking, lake
  - c. Arts
  - d. Shopping/Retail
  - e. Night life
  - f. Food
2. Feel or flavor of the place; Welcoming
  - a. Attractive
  - b. Sense of place/Culture/Authenticity/Uniqueness
  - c. Safe
  - d. Affordable/Good Value
  - e. Family oriented
3. Services to use when you are there
  - a. Lodging
  - b. Wayfinding Signs
  - c. Sidewalks & safe streets
4. Marketing or branding that encouraged you to go there
  - a. Good reputation
  - b. Strong brand / Attractive photos & marketing

**Question 4: How would Unity benefit from becoming a destination?**

Four themes emerged:

1. Economic Growth & Opportunity: Increased tax base & employment opportunities
2. Attract people to the town: Diversity, aging population, village revitalization
3. Growth could lead to more services and attractions that both residents and visitors can enjoy
4. Make Unity an even greater place to live; maintain the small town, big community feel

**Question 5: What must be preserved or avoided if Unity becomes a destination?**

Four themes emerged:

1. Protect the rural nature of Unity: quiet, safe, agrarian, clean & beautiful natural environment
2. Support the people who already live and work here or want to live here
3. Maintain the current village look and feel
4. Preserve the culture of community engagement & small town feel: Welcoming attitude, working together

**Synthesis of small group ideas for moving Unity forward toward becoming a destination**

Twelve Ideas rose to the top:

1. Transportation, Safety: Bikeable/walkable downtown, condition & maintenance of streets & sidewalks, increased lighting
2. Lodging: Diversity of lodging choices that match need, campground, sporting lodge, rentals for professionals
3. Trail System Connectivity & Rails to Trails Development; Recreation: Connect to other existing networks, maps & signs, include all users, more use of Field of Dreams
4. Café & Meeting Place: Coffee, food, inclusive, matches Unity's values
5. Brew Pub: Brewery, quality food
6. Co-Working Professional Work Space: Office space, internet, resources
7. Artisan Retreat Space: Retail, studio space, educational opportunities
8. Value Added Food Processing: Freezing/Packing
9. Value Added Food Processing: Animal/Livestock
10. Developing a Brand for Unity: Build on environmental sustainability of Unity College & MOFGA; Include assets like diversity, agriculture, lake, heritage
11. Economic Development Resources: Central point of contact for economic development planning, communications, and coordination among entities
12. Lake as a Destination: Fishing/boating/recreation, research with the college, improve water quality

Attendees voted with dots to indicate which of these they thought were the best ideas and which they wanted to work on. Based on those answers and the dynamics

of the group, six work groups were formed for developing these ideas into projects that can move Unity toward becoming a destination.

1. Lodging
2. Trails
3. Brew Pub
4. Artisan Retreat
5. Developing a Brand
6. Lake as a destination

### **Next Steps**

Groups have been asked to meet between the first and second public event to hone their project ideas and develop a pitch to be presented to the community at the second public event. The pitch should include:

1. Project description
2. Relationship between project idea and Unity becoming a destination, inclusive of themes shared by the community at the first event
3. List of willing supporters and resources
4. Budget

The project pitch assignment guide provided to small groups is attached.

The second public event will be held on Monday March 20th from 6:30-8:30pm at the Unity College Center for the Performing Arts. Project groups are encouraged to meet multiple times before March 20<sup>th</sup> and are welcome to meet immediately before the public event from 5-6:30pm. Groups should be prepared to present their ideas to their community in a fun and compelling way. Presentations should last no more than 8 minutes and can include visual aids of the group's choice.

Following the next public event GrowSmart Maine will work with the EDC to report back to the Unity Foundation, to include a funding request for some or all of the project next steps. Alternative sources of funding for moving projects forward will also be developed and pursued by the EDC.

*Attached: Project Pitch instructions for small groups.*

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## Making Unity a Destination Small Group Projects

At the February 19<sup>th</sup> Community event, people signed up to work on one (or two) of six projects to make Unity a destination. Each group chose a leader and will have a liaison with the Economic Development Committee (EDC) with one EDC member on that committee. Those who did not sign up for a group that day are welcome to add yourself to a group now.

Each group will “pitch” the project during a second public event (Monday March 20<sup>th</sup>, 6:30-8:30pm, UCCPA) asking fellow Unity residents to vote to move this project forward. Components of the pitch are listed below.

- Describe the project in as much detail as possible (with as much enthusiasm as possible)
- Define how this project will address the concerns and opportunities raised at the Feb 19<sup>th</sup> event
  - What do you value most about Unity?
  - What is lacking in Unity?
- Identify project leader who is willing to
  - be the primary contact for this project
  - organize the group in this work
  - ensure the team is ready to present at the public event
- Identify willing supporters, knowing a diverse group will be more effective in advocating for the project and moving it forward. Supporters are willing to:
  - work on preparing the pitch and attending the event if possible
  - help make the pitch, whether in preparation or presentation
  - work on the project if there is support for the pitch
- Outline the immediate next steps to make this project happen
  - What are the first steps, to be done over the course of the next few months, to move the project forward?
  - Do you need more information/outside expertise?
  - Are there meetings you can attend to learn more?
  - Are there materials needed?
- Propose a budget for the next steps of the project
  - what will it take to move the project forward, ideally over the next few months?
  - where might funding for this work come from?

Following the next public event (Pitch your Destination Idea, Unity!), GrowSmart Maine will work with the EDC to report back to the Unity Foundation, to include a funding request for some or all of the project next steps. Alternative sources of funding for moving projects forward will also be developed and pursued by the EDC.