

Forging the Future
Community Leadership and Economic
Change in Coös County, New Hampshire



MICHELE DILLON



Building knowledge for families and communities

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A Carsey Institute Report

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Key Findings

- Coös County has a strong town/community-based civic infrastructure and a strong spirit of community commitment.
- Community leaders are deeply dedicated to the well-being of Coös.
- There is a strong consensus among community leaders that Coös needs to work together as a county with a unified vision and voice while respecting the specific character, strengths, and needs of each local community.
- There is a strong consensus among community leaders that Coös has too many community/economic development organizations.
- Community leaders see signs of increased cooperation across Coös.
- Community leaders vary in their vision of economic development and how economic progress should be achieved.
- Tensions surround competing models of development (from more traditional to more progressive strategies), and whether and how to balance the press of job creation with considerations regarding environmental sustainability and the region's quality of life.
- The Coös Symposium has been critical in disseminating information about communities, organizations and individuals, and building and strengthening connections across them.
- Many community leaders are optimistic about the future of Coös.
- Community leaders are positive about the entrepreneurial and work environment in Coös.
- Continuing challenges impacting Coös' future include strengthening:
 - Institutional capacity (such as hospitals and schools)
 - Innovation, entrepreneurship, and work-force development
 - Community-wide support for tourism

Research Methodology

This report is based on research findings from a case study of community change conducted in Coös County, New Hampshire, for two-and-a-half years (June 2009–December 2011). The aim of the study was to investigate how local community leaders in Coös assess the initiatives, challenges, opportunities, and progress in the North Country during this time of economic transition. The primary data-gathering method was personal interviews with community leaders, supplemented by observation, documentary, and survey data.

Personal Interviews with Fifty-One Community Leaders

I purposefully sought to interview a sample of individuals who are playing a visibly active role in shaping and steering the many dimensions of community life in Coös today. Fifty-one leaders were interviewed from across different occupational sectors and geographical locales. The sectors represented included economic development (20 percent), hospitality, manufacturing, and other businesses (20 percent), health and family services (12 percent), education (12 percent), politics and local government (12 percent), environment (10 percent), and mass media and culture (14 percent). Many of the people interviewed held executive-level leadership positions in one particular sector and provided an extensive amount of voluntary leadership in one or more other sectors (such as serving on local committees/boards). The three main geographical areas within Coös were evenly represented: Berlin/Gorham/Errol (37 percent), Lancaster/Whitefield/Twin Mountain/Jefferson (33 percent), and Colebrook/Pittsburg/Groveton (30 percent). Just over half (57 percent) of the interviewees were men, and 43 percent were women. Their ages ranged from late 20s to late 60s, and reflecting the fact that executive leadership (both paid and non-profit) typically increases with age,

more interviewees (59 percent) were over age 50 than were under 50 (41 percent). Over two-thirds (69 percent) of the interviewees were either born in, or long-term residents of, Coös (see Table 1). Leaders were chosen based on their visibility and significance in the county, evidenced from their participation in the county's political, business, and civic life, non-profit and community organizations and committees, and leadership forums (such as the Coös Symposium).¹ I conducted follow-up interviews in 2010 with four leaders interviewed in 2009, and re-interviewed two

TABLE 1: THE DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF COÖS LEADERS PERSONALLY INTERVIEWED, 2009-2011

Gender

Men 57%
Women 43%

Geographical area

Berlin, Milan, Gorham 37%
Lancaster, Whitefield, Jefferson 33%
Colebrook, Pittsburg, Groveton 30%

Sector

Business 20%
Economic development 20%
Education 12%
Health/Family services 12%
Politics/municipal government 12%
Environment 10%
Media/Culture 14%

Age

Less than 50 41%
50 and over 59%

Residency

Native-born/Long-term resident 69%
Moved to Coös within past 15 years 31%
(N = 51)

of these same individuals in 2011, to gauge their evaluation of the previous year's developments. Thus, fifty-one individuals were interviewed for a total of fifty-seven interviews.

The interview format was semi-structured. Interviewees were asked to discuss the reasons for their commitment to the community, their assessment of the institutional infrastructure in Coös (including its hospitals, schools, and development organizations), their views of specific initiatives underway (including the rebranding project, the potential of biomass and other alternative energy sources, the construction of a new federal prison), their perceptions of the opportunities and challenges in Coös, and their vision of its future. Depending on the particular expertise and background of the person I was interviewing, the specific topics covered and the amount of time spent on any one topic varied. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours and were, on average, approximately 1 hour. All but three of the interviews took place in Coös County; and all but three were audio-taped. The taped interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts and my detailed notes from the non-taped interviews were coded for recurring themes that emerged in response to the questions asked.

The personal interview data are supplemented by other sources of data including a survey of community leaders, observation and group conversation data, documentary data, post-symposium surveys, and a survey of community residents.

Survey of Community Leaders

I designed and conducted a survey of community leaders in the summer of 2011. The individuals invited to participate in the survey included people from Coös who have attended a Coös symposium, members of the Coös Economic Action Plan Committee (CEAP), and additional business and political leaders from across the county. A two-page, self-administered mail questionnaire was sent to 213 individuals. Eight were returned with address unknown, and 108 completed questionnaires were returned (yielding a high

response rate of 53 percent). The questionnaire asked respondents their views of how well Coös is currently doing, what specific improvements they have noticed in the previous two years, what specific things they would like to see change, what about Coös they are most proud of, the main challenges facing Coös in the next few years, how optimistic they are about their own future and about the future of Coös, and their views of community life.

Observation and Group Conversation Data

These data come from my attendance as a participant-observer at three three-day Coös County symposia; group conversations with member-participants at two meetings of the Coös Family Support Project (CFSP), and with members of the Coös Economic Development Corporation (CEDC) prior to one of its meetings; and as an observer at three one-day grantee workshops, and two regional rebranding meetings. I took detailed notes at these events which occurred between May 2009 and August 2011.

Documentary Data

Documentary data consisted of: (i) Newspapers: Content analysis of three of the county's local newspapers conducted over a specific interval at the beginning of the study (March 2009–May 2009) in order to establish topics of interest to the region, and continuing monitoring of local newspapers (May 2009–December 2011) to track developments in the region; and (ii) Relevant documents pertaining to the region's economic development, Coös symposia, and the Northern New Hampshire Branding Project (subsequently referred to as the Branding Project). The Branding Project materials include tourist asset assessment reports and marketing plans, business technical assistance reports, project protocols, email exchanges among project leaders and community partners, meeting agendas, minutes of meetings, and the project's quarterly and annual reports.

Post-symposium Surveys

Post-symposium surveys of participants who attended the Coös symposium in 2008 (N = 60), 2009 (N = 60), 2010 (N = 71), and 2011 (N = 59). The questionnaires were administered online and the surveys were conducted by The Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation.²

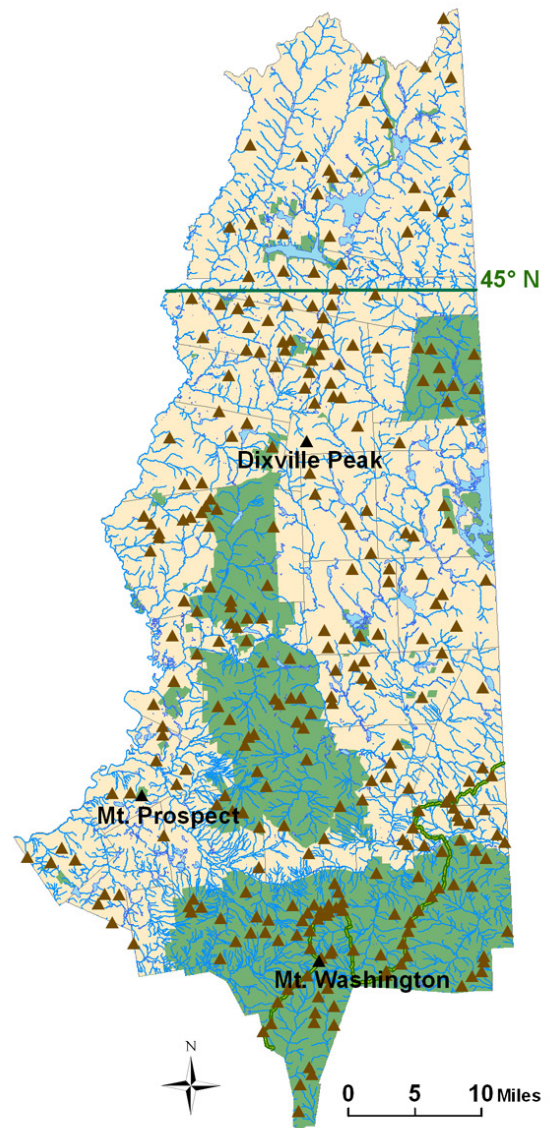
Survey of Community Residents

Relevant data from telephone interviews with a representative sample of community residents in Coös conducted in 2010 as part of the Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA 2010) survey established by the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire.³

Introduction

Coös County—New Hampshire’s North Country—stands tall, bordered by Vermont to its west, Maine to its east, and Quebec to its north. It is home to the White Mountains National Forest and Presidential Range in the southern part of the county, which includes Mount Washington, the tallest mountain in the Northeastern United States, and other majestic peaks dominate across much of the rest of the county. Coös is part of the Northern Forest region and is heavily forested, with a rich stock of softwood (red spruce and balsam fir), hardwood (American beech, sugar maple, and yellow birch), and totally mixed species (red maple, red spruce, balsam fir, paper birch, aspen, some white pine).⁴ The Appalachian Trail meanders through a broad swath of its ground. The powerful Androscoggin river, dotted intermittently with boom piers reminiscent of a timber-logging economy, pounds along through the eastern side of the county down from Lake Umbagog, and is matched on the county’s western edge by the Connecticut and Ammonoosuc rivers. Smaller rivers and lakes, and several covered bridges dating from the mid-nineteenth century, further enrich the county’s spectacular landscape.

FIGURE 1. COÖS COUNTY NATURAL AMENITIES



Economy

Coös was settled by frontiers-people as early as the eleventh century, and its more recent nineteenth-century settlement was driven by an ethnically diverse group of white immigrants—French Canadians, Irish, Italians, Poles, Germans, and English, among others—all of whom came in search of employment in the lumber, paper, and pulp mills established in the region in the 1880s. The mills, though not immune to the financial stresses of the Great Depression and other intermittent declines, provided many generations of Coös residents with steady jobs and solid incomes until the late 1980s when in Coös, as elsewhere in America, manufacturing declined as a result of the shift toward service and information industries, and the displacement of core manufacturing jobs to lower-cost economies. The decline became especially significant in Coös in 2001 following the closing of the Berlin paper mill, and the subsequent closing of mills in Groveton and Gorham. Thus Coös

experienced an 18 percent loss in manufacturing jobs between 2000 and 2006. Currently, it has the highest unemployment rate in the state (7.7 percent compared to 4.9 percent for the state), and a lower median household income (\$39,558 versus \$56,557), a much smaller proportion of college graduates (12 percent versus 29 percent), and a higher child poverty rate (18 percent versus 10 percent) compared to New Hampshire as a whole.⁵ The decline in manufacturing is such that this sector currently accounts for 14 percent of all jobs in Coös. The county's biggest employment sector is education, health care, and social assistance (24 percent), with health and social assistance composing the bulk of these jobs (17 percent). Retail (13 percent), and arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food services (12 percent) account for approximately the same proportion of employees as manufacturing.⁶

Demography

The current demographic profile of Coös reflects the economic uncertainty and the paucity of employment opportunities in the region. While New Hampshire has seen significant population gains (an increase of 6.5 percent between 2000 and 2010), largely as a result of the migration of professional and skilled workers and their young families from the Boston metropolitan area, Coös had roughly the same population in 2010 (33,055 people), as it had in 1970 (34,291). As in other rural counties that have suffered a decline in manufacturing, a trend exacerbated by the impact of the current protracted recession, it is hard for Coös to attract large numbers of new residents. The out-migration of young adults and lower birth rates among current cohorts means that Coös tends to have more deaths than births; it is thus an aging county with approximately one-fifth (19.4 percent) of its population over 65.⁷

Although the loss of young adults is a source of concern for families and community residents, it is not a trend unique to Coös. Indeed, other rural counties that

have experienced a precipitous decline in agriculture and in resource-based manufacturing industries have experienced considerably larger population losses than Coös; rural Kansas counties, for example, show a substantial 16 percent decline in population between 1990 and 2010.⁸ It should also be pointed out that “leaving home” is a core part of the cultural narrative of growing up and becoming a self-reliant adult, and has been true for several generations of Americans.⁹ Further, the plentiful natural amenities and related job-creation possibilities that exist in Coös makes it more likely that Coös youth, compared to young people who leave rural communities with few resources and amenities, may subsequently return to Coös in adulthood as either full- or part-time residents. As a testament to the region’s extensive natural amenities, second homes account for 21 percent of the county’s housing.¹⁰ This figure is likely to increase with the retirement of large numbers of baby-boomers and the anticipated migration of many of them to amenity-rich communities over the next several years.

Civic Infrastructure

Despite its relatively small population, Coös has a large civic infrastructure embedded in its many geographically dispersed towns and communities (see Figure 2). The county tends to be construed in terms of three geographical sub-regions anchored by its three main towns: Berlin (technically a city) in the Southeast, Lancaster (the county capital), and Colebrook in the North—though these boundaries are porous and also belie the inter-community economic and cultural divisions within any one of these areas. Each of these three areas has, for example, a hospital, at least one Chamber of Commerce, at least one community economic development organization, several schools, and at least one newspaper such that the county as a whole has three hospitals, five Chambers of Commerce, at least ten town-based economic development organizations, six newspapers, seven high schools, three middle schools, and thirteen elementary schools. For the most part, the community institutions in Coös have a local town/community focus, although there is one county-wide economic development organization (the Coös Economic Development Corporation [CEDC]), a regional community college, and two economic development organizations whose remit includes Coös and adjacent northern counties (the Northern Community Investment Corporation [NCIC], and the North Country Council [NCC]).

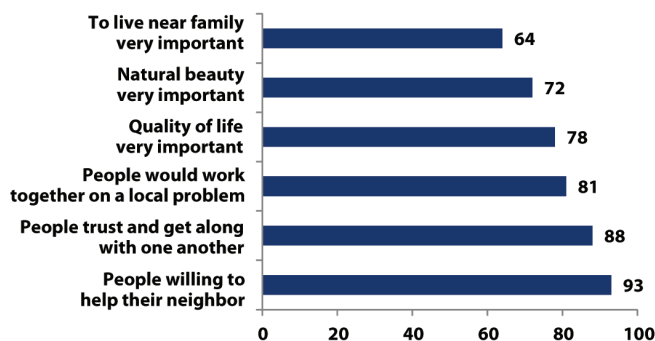
FIGURE 2. COÖS COUNTY CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE



Community Spirit

Like many rural Americans, Coös residents have remarkably high levels of neighborly trust and cooperativeness. In the Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA) survey conducted by the Carsey Institute in 2010, 94 percent of Coös residents said that people are willing to help their neighbors, 89 percent said that people in the community trust and get along with one another, and 82 percent said that if the community were faced with a local problem such as a school closure, people in the community would work together to address the issue. The strong community attachment in Coös is all the more noteworthy given that over half of the survey respondents (57 percent) were not born in Coös but moved there as adults. Family ties matter in keeping people attached to Coös. Despite widespread awareness of the lack of job opportunities (identified as a problem by 96 percent of respondents), and the view expressed by many that its schools are not as good as they should be (59 percent), two-thirds (64 percent) of Coös residents said that wanting to live near their family is a “very important” reason for staying. Coös residents’ attachment to the community is further consolidated by their appreciation for its quality of life (affirmed by 78 percent as a reason for staying in Coös) and the area’s natural beauty (affirmed by 72 percent) (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. COÖS RESIDENTS’ COMMUNITY ATTITUDES



These positive views of community are shared by community leaders. When asked to name one thing about Coös that makes them particularly proud, 47 percent of leaders surveyed identified its people and sense of community, an additional 20 percent mentioned community values, and 25 percent mentioned the area’s natural beauty (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. LEADERS’ VIEWS OF WHAT MAKES THEM PARTICULARLY PROUD ABOUT COÖS



Many of the community leaders I personally interviewed spontaneously spoke about the strong community spirit of neighborly help and trust that exists in Coös. One woman said:

If you live in a small town up here, if you’re down on your luck because your mother has cancer or your house burned down, people are just right there for you. They might not be otherwise, but they always are for those things. I think people always have that in the back of their mind, ‘this could be me.’ It’s easier to see that you’re part of a community here than if you lived in Manchester, Concord, or Portsmouth. Even if you don’t go out and socialize much, you know your neighbors, because you probably lived next to them for forty years. If your roof caves in, they’re there to say, ‘Come on over and sleep at our house while your roof gets repaired.’ That sort of thing. The community aspect of it is, to me, very appealing to living here. And I think people who come from

away find that the nicest part of living in northern New Hampshire is that people are friendly and generous. How that sustains us over the years, I don't know. I think maybe it sustains you spiritually and emotionally, even if it doesn't economically sustain you. But I think that's part of life, too. It sometimes is just as important as how you make the money to buy the groceries. You have that support around you. I think that here in the North Country, you do have that.

An executive who had to leave the area on business for a few months commented, "I couldn't wait to get back. It's one of those things, you can leave your house unlocked and your keys in your car. That's really different from a lot of other places in the world." Similarly, someone working in economic development noted, "A lot of deals are done here by a shake of the hand—people trust one another."

Others spoke of the readiness of people to work together on specific local school or community projects that yield visible results. One man recounted:

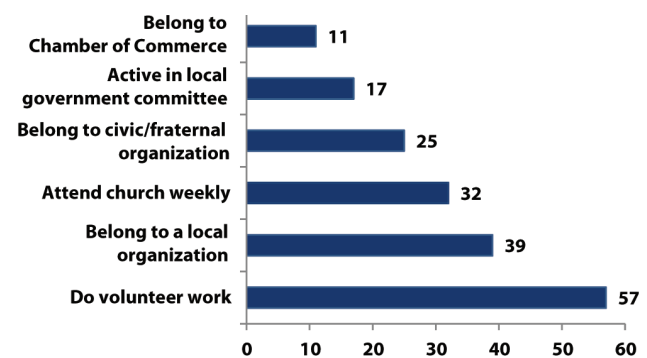
[We've] done well fundraising for playgrounds and soccer fields. It's a wonderful alliance between grants and private donations. I think Lancaster got something like \$80,000 for a playground.... This [soccer] ball field thing [at White Mountains Regional High School] is fantastic. I'm very impressed. And some of the same people were back in the spring and built a new batting cage and something for the kids to do. So that's the upside, people are willing to help, there's some strength from those that can commit to step up a notch to do things for the community.

A business-owner praised the willingness of businesses and workers in Berlin to contribute building materials and work hours to refurbish the ice-hockey rink, while an interviewee in the Colebrook area similarly affirmed the willingness of people to not just donate to causes but to get involved themselves in volunteer work such as painstakingly removing old plaster from the building that was refurbished for the Colebrook Arts Center.

The arts are a vibrant part of Coös life, and they receive solid support from local business leaders and residents, some of whom travel long distances across the county to hear and see performances in the region's main arts centers (located in Berlin, Colebrook, and Whitefield) as well as in local venues (such as hospitals, churches, and cafés) that frequently feature art exhibits, performances, and other artistic presentations. The positive community spirit that exists in Coös is also on full display at local area annual festivals and at weekly farmers' markets. These venues are significant occasions for community residents to meet and socialize with one another, and to solidify their attachment to the community.

In addition to residents' readiness to step up to help families and to get involved in community projects on an as-needed basis, many formally participate in Coös' various community institutions, non-profit economic, family services, and arts organizations, voluntary associations (as in Rotary Clubs), churches, and annual public festivals and fairs. As indicated by the CERA 2010 survey, the majority of residents (57 percent) do volunteer work, one in three (32 percent) attends church weekly, one in four (25 percent) belongs to a civic or fraternal organization, somewhat fewer (17 percent) are active in local government (for example, a land zoning committee), and one in ten (11 percent) belongs to a Chamber of Commerce; overall, well over a third (39 percent) of Coös residents belong to some local organization (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. COÖS RESIDENTS' COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT



Community Leaders' Motivations

The painful—and for many in Coös, unimaginable—shut-down of the Berlin mill on September 10, 2001, catapulted 800 people out of work and without health insurance. Its loss, and in quick succession the loss of additional mills and ancillary industries, plunged Coös into an economic and social crisis. It demanded that community leaders, as one interviewee told me, step up and try to “remake the fabric of the community.” That is precisely what many in Coös have been doing ever since in a dedicated effort “to steer the community out of crisis.” This is not an easy task. Even in the absence of the current nationwide recession, the task of attracting new industries or employment sectors and developing well-paying, stable jobs can seem insurmountable given the unrelenting economic competitiveness of life in a global economy. This is a competitiveness that not only dominates the business world, but increasingly too is penetrating the structure and delivery of non-economic goods including basic health care, education, and family and social services. Additionally, in any community, local politics and local cultural issues can further complicate strategic efforts to rebuild the economic and social fabric of the community. Against this challenging backdrop, Coös residents have shown remarkable resilience and continue to remain committed to Coös and its future. Notwithstanding the out-migration that has occurred in the last decade as some families moved out of the region to find work elsewhere, the recent stability in Coös’ population share suggests that many residents remain committed to staying. This is a view that is also supported by survey evidence; in the CERA 2010 survey of Coös residents, 88 percent of respondents said that they expected to live in the area in the next five years. As one leader I interviewed succinctly commented, “The people who currently live in Coös really want to be here.”

The leaders of several of Coös’ community institutions, businesses, and non-profit organizations have been at the forefront of efforts to make Coös a place not only where people really want to live, but a place where they can have good jobs and a high quality of life. These diverse individuals are strongly committed to the welfare of Coös and expend enormous amounts of energy trying to accomplish improvements in their own particular sector (including health/family services, education, hospitality, and business), as well as moving the county

as a whole forward. When I asked those I interviewed why they are so committed to Coös, what makes them get up every morning and keep doing all that they do despite what must often seem like bleak odds of success, the emotional commitment of many was strikingly present. It was clear that these individuals felt an urgent obligation, even a calling, to make a difference in the community, and a strong sense that if they did not accept this responsibility, then the job might not get done. One executive, who is not a native of Coös, responded:

What keeps me going is easy to answer—a deep faith—my belief I am here in [this community] because this is where God has put me. If I could choose to be someplace else I would be.... This is a mission for me—I don’t mean this in a degrading way toward the community or in a self-aggrandizing way. But I need to be here to provide the quality [service] that is so desperately needed in this area.... I do this because I need to be here [because of concern for the people of this community]—I could make more money somewhere else.... I love trying to create a vision that we can be more collectively than we are as individuals.... I really like getting the folks involved to be better than they are.

Others similarly saw their community commitment in terms of a larger purpose. One person, speaking about the various efforts of a number of leading community figures, commented, “We are a group of leaders who have accepted the responsibility [to improve the community]. It is not simply a desire to lead.” Another said, “...we are remaking a whole society. We’re not just remaking loans and businesses and so on. It’s much deeper than that.” This view was echoed by others time and again across different sectors with many commenting on how grateful they were to have had opportunities to make a difference in their community. As one person said, “We put community at the core of everything we do.” Another said, “I always think of the work we do not just in terms of how we can serve [this organization’s clientele] but the whole community.”

While life-long Coös residents and those with family ties in the region are motivated to some extent by

these attachments, their commitment to Coös also has a “non-selfish” charge. One person explained:

...so [family and economic ties] are our selfish motives. But then, gosh, I would just love to know that we had a part in making this a better community. I would love to know that. I’m sure we won’t stay here for our whole lives, but that’s our little legacy of just putting some positive, having a positive impact.... I only try to be a leader by example. I don’t see myself as a leader at all. I just try to be a leader by trying to really take good care of my customers, by running a business with a lot of integrity, to be a really honest business person.

Another interviewee saw a clear-cut relation between his skills and specific needs in the community. He explained:

...it was the idea to maybe give back to [this particular community]. This was a big cut in pay to come here, but I was tired...of being away.... My family’s here, so that drove me, but then it became the idea of you’re one of [a few who can make a difference]. I’ve always been an impact player all of my life, so when I saw this [problem that needed fixing] and the more I analyzed the problem, the root, the cause, and the effect, I more or less decided, well we’ll start with the root and then we’ll work our way through, to the [much improved] point we’re at today.... At the end of the day I just wanted to see something better for [this specific community].

Other leaders too are people who deliberately want to make an impact and to see that they are having an impact. As one interviewee declared, “My benchmark is that when...I can’t see my fingerprints any more, I move on to a different career path.”

One man explained his extensive volunteer commitment as due simply to being a member of the community:

So it’s just putting in my share. I can do it. I [have flexibility with my work]. I can find the time.... I’m a member of the community so I said, sure, why not? I don’t know how long I’ll do it because it’s a lot of work [already doing it for many years].... My family wants me to stop [volunteering]. It’s a lot of hours. It’s worth it, that’s what I think, [it will help] make a change. I feel like it’s slow. It’s really slow, but we are making progress.

Another said, “I care so much because I chose to move here.”

Others similarly spoke of their felt obligation to the community and of their desire too to see more people “step up to the plate.” One person who is active in several community organizations said:

[This specific community] has always been in my heart. It needs a lot of attention. Unfortunately, there are very few people who take the time to give it the attention it needs in order to make good things happen. I think if we had a larger population base we would have more people willing to step up to the plate. Meanwhile, I am willing to do what it takes to get it done.... I think there are some people who could give their time, but it’s usually the same people who are sitting around the same board tables for almost every organization in the area. Some people just don’t get involved. And they’re usually the ones with the loudest voices of criticism.... When they complain to me, I say, ‘Well where were you? Step up to the table and be part of it.’ And they will have nothing to do with it.

One person who stepped up in recent years is someone whose family was directly impacted by a mill closure. He explained:

It’s like the seven stages of grieving, yeah, and you finally come to acceptance and how people deal with that is on an individual basis. I got mad. I got angry, but then I moved on and said, okay, what am I going to do about it? I can’t wallow in it. Some people don’t come out of it and that’s an issue. That’s an issue across the North Country. That increases alcoholism, drug use, family problems. So those kinds of things all have to be addressed too, so those same things will help be alleviated by bringing some employment up here.... You’ll see changes in five years. Things will start to grow. The more we get people interested in doing things—working and changing attitudes to get people wanting to work for their community...attitudes are changing. You’ve got to [change your attitude] or it’s going to get to you.... I think just more people seeing that there are people out there [trying to make a difference] encourages others to get involved.

Concerns about Leadership Quality

Some other community figures with whom I spoke were concerned, however, about the depth or quality of some of the leadership in Coös. One woman said:

And I made the conscious choice to come back here. Because it's home. There's still a lot of really great things about this area, but I'm just seeing a lot of changes I find troubling [such as the quality of the school, the state of the physical maintenance of water/sewage utilities].... I guess I don't know what leaders are going to pull us out of this. And I'm real concerned about that.

In general, the business people I interviewed tended to be critical of the decision-making of some local committees and what they saw as either foot-dragging or the imposition of obstacles hindering a business-friendly environment. One commented:

You know what it is. It's a hard thing to get the right people to spend the time on those boards, to be elected. Not to say anything against them, the people that are on them. But there's probably not a lot of business experience there, and sometimes you look at a given issue and you say, 'This is so simple, this is such an easy thing.' And we're complicating it.

It is understandable that business owners, in particular, may be reluctant to take on a more visible community leadership role. Aside from the time pressures of running a business, some interviewees commented that "speaking out" on various issues in the community can hurt individuals' reputations, and if they are business figures, their business profits. One non-business person said:

I think leadership is in short supply.... Certainly business leaders are doing what they need to do to keep their businesses afloat and to make a profit and most of them shy from taking a role in trying to move the public opinion one way or another because it typically falls back against their business. I'm not going to buy my insurance from him. I'm not going to bank there, whatever.

A business owner who is visibly active in the community said:

I don't think there's nearly enough [people speaking out in public].... Maybe they're afraid they are stepping on toes, or would hurt people, or alienating themselves. Business-wise, business people are always afraid they're going to lose business if they speak out. I get it. I can't put political signs outside, so I won't because I might offend the other side of the equation, but still you can speak out on things that are factual, and give your opinion of things. I don't have a problem with it.

Another business owner said:

The reason why I'm not [a member of a particular organization] is I don't fit in the mold very well, and if I get into a group like that.... I have very strong opinions.... I have good ideas, but I don't feel like people around here really want to hear my ideas. I think I would fit in... I think, if I were part of a team in another community, if my business was somewhere else. Our business is doing well but [some people] wouldn't come in here if I was [in x organization], once they were finding out what I thought.

A non-business-person in a different town echoed this view, saying, "Unfortunately, sometimes the folks that have the good ideas are not the ones who want to be in front."

Another spoke of the tensions that can arise if individuals are seen as being too pushy about certain ideas. As one person said, "Talking to you one-on-one I'm a big time leader, but I'm not so good at pushing my ideas in public venues.... I try to avoid the perception that I am conspiring to change the community." This person was particularly critical of the economic development strategies being pursued and argued instead for a group of leaders to convene "who would say 'Let's blow up the old model of economic development. We are done with that. We know it isn't working.'" Another person in a different community was also critical of the old model of economic development, stating: "We are reaching this critical point where we have had a lot of ideas talked about for years, but we haven't had a real strong person in economic development either here [in this local area] or really in the county who can take those ideas and projects to the next step."

Proliferation of Community Development Organizations

The strong community infrastructure in Coös means that, as noted earlier, there are many different organizations and groups in any one community (see Figure 3). This is a positive thing in that it provides residents with ample opportunities to connect with others and to get involved in organizations/groups that are committed to improving some aspect of community well-being. On the other hand, some of these groups and organizations are engaged in overlapping activities and pursuing goals similar to other groups either in their own community or in some other Coös town. The policy question at issue is whether the outcomes pursued (such as more and better jobs, child literacy, and higher standardized student test scores) would be better achieved if there was greater inter-organizational collaboration or even organizational consolidation. Many of the community leaders I interviewed agreed that, in particular, there are too many community economic development organizations in the county and that this is a continuing source of frustration and inefficiency. Individuals who themselves are involved in economic development were as critical of this proliferation as were individuals from other sectors. One person stated:

The reality is there are too many economic development organizations. Should women go to WREN [Women's Rural Entrepreneurial Network]? We are all too busy even to understand each other's programs. They are especially plentiful in Coös.... But boards often resist; they want to maintain themselves and their organizations.... The problem is that when you get into multiple independent leaders, no one is steering the ship, they are splashing a lot of water but not getting anywhere. [Some named leaders of non-economic organizations] get it.... The right goal is to get the organizations to work together. But there are a lot of politics still in doing that; you take a lot of abuse.

Another interviewee said:

I think the county would be better served if we had one really robust outfit, that when they spoke, people didn't say 'NCIC, or CEDC, now what does that stand for?...' But if we're all one agency,

it wouldn't matter. And we're all, in theory, working for the same things, which is to create jobs and create the environment for economic development, economic successes. But I guess we go back to the inter-town competition. It's the same with the agencies. Well, who is going to say uncle first? We've got five Chambers of Commerce in the county, and they function as five independent entities. 'Come visit us'—the other four don't exist. In order for them all to succeed, they need to bring somebody to their tourism area and then have something in somebody else's tourism area that's so attractive most people have to spend another night. And it's that extra night, it's the gas, it's the lodging, it's the diversionary activity the next day that spells the difference between us rebuilding our tourism sector and not rebuilding our tourism sector.... [The Chambers] are all right back to organizing themselves back into a little parochial box, and it's just not the way it works.

A person active in various community projects said:

If you said, 'What did CEDC do in the last twelve months?' it would be very difficult to say what they did.... Is there a need for CEDC? I have mixed thoughts on that. It's the only organization dedicated to Coös, because you have a bunch of other organizations that do several counties, or that just do local. Is that important? I'm not sure. I'm really not sure, but I think what they need to do is figure out what is not being done and is that something they can do? I don't know what will happen.... My personal opinion is that there are too many economic development organizations. We shouldn't be competitive. We should first of all work together.... We need to work together better. Would I point to the ones that I think need to go in public? No. I wouldn't do that.... If you look at BEDCO [Business Enterprise Development Corporation] and NCIC's lending department, they both seem to do the same thing. There is probably an advantage to sharing the shaky deals, but does BEDCO need to exist?... And NCIC and NCC compete with one another.... [Families

wonder] why there are so many non-profits. Are they just there to feed themselves instead of really helping the community?¹¹

A businessman argued:

[Having different economic groups] doesn't provide the cohesiveness we need as a county because there are so many groups that do so many of the same things. We need to merge some of these. But the key to that is getting people to come to the table, and they don't seem to want to come to the table.

A successful business owner who is seriously considering leaving Coös because of the sense that "it's going nowhere," spoke with frustration, saying:

I was just shocked [recently], as a business-owner, to learn about the amount of non-profits that operate in the area.... I just thought, wow, we really have a lot of non-profits.... I cannot believe that there's that many people dedicated to Coös County, all these people working so hard for the better good of the county but who are just not seeing what it is that we really need, basic essential services [such as hospitality management training and telecommunication resources].

Another person said:

The problem is like right now [July 2010] we're discussing the alphabet soup that we have. Three years ago I brought this up. We have AVER [Androscoggin Valley Economic Recovery Corporation], NCIC, BEDCO, yada, yada yada, CEDC, all these agencies, and they're allowed to exist. They have various funding sources. CEDC was permanently funded by the county commissioners. We saw how the county commissioners took away their money because they didn't acquiesce to their demands, so if the county commissioners were smart they'd say we're going to create one group. We'll fund part of it and let these other groups come together and be in one cohesive room. You would see there'd be a willingness to do that among the groups. I know you'd be eliminating organizations. Like I'm willing to eliminate [particular organization] and I don't care about being a board member. We'd have a more cohesive structure, but the commissioners have been so vindictive and have been so politically domineering or ideologically driven that they scare the professional person away.

Speaking with exasperation, another leader said:

I'll tell you something that's the most frustrating thing for me right now. The most frustrating thing for me right now is people are grasping at the next new thing. And not giving enough credit for investments that have been made over a fifteen year period and cultural heritage tourism and local economic development and creative economy and all those things.... Everyone is trying to run organizations without an executive director. They want the boards to run them. But that's not how you run a business, you don't do it by committee.... I want groups to stay focused on the project they are working on, not shifting all the time.

Someone in a different part of the Coös was also critical, saying:

I'm concerned about the economic development people here in [specific town]. We've had more than one of those folks on the [organization] whose job it is to go and find industries and businesses to relocate here. They're supposed to be recruiting people to come here, creating jobs. I'm hearing that the meetings are just talk, talk—that there isn't anything really going on there. And I'm real worried about that. It concerns me that there's nobody leading the charge as it were to get us out of this.... There is some overlapping of roles, and I think in one way that is what the Chamber, and in this town the [local economic development organization], should be doing, but you know the Chamber of Commerce has tended to become more of a marketing tool I think. I hear a lot of people say they want to be part of the Chamber so they can be on the website and be in the directory and all that.

Talk rather than action was also a theme at the core of another interviewee's criticism of the economic development organizations:

All they want to do is sit around and talk. And I have no patience for that....I don't think they do a whole lot to tell you the truth. I think their hearts are in the right place. I think...they live in those [organizational] circles... I think there's a lot of self-interest...[and] if you make the problems go away, there's no jobs for them [and for the organizations].

Another person was also critical of the lack of effective leadership, stating:

...the southern end of Coös...has changed dramatically in the last several years, for the good, but in Coös as a whole, I see a lot of stagnation, not a lot moving forward. That's why we have problems with our hospitals and businesses.... There's very little growth. The one thing that would solve every ill that Coös would ever have is jobs. People can talk about every problem that Coös has and they can all be addressed by decent paying jobs.... But I don't see anybody here creating enterprise zones, and you don't see anybody offering competitive tax advantages for people to relocate here. I know that White Mountain

Community College finally has some four-year programs, which took a long time.... Another thing we are lacking is a four-year degree program; they could be doing a lot more. Our county commissioners, a lot of infighting, a lot of fighting against the branding, a lot of wasted time concentrating on things that may be of concern, but nothing to enhance our position in terms of bringing jobs in.... Anybody who can tax us, and they do tax us, has the ability to take a portion of that money and put it towards creating a better climate. But their focus is on the nursing home, the county prison, the county farm, and that's pretty much it.... [Economic groups like BEDCO and AVER] may be doing something, but it's small-scale.

Local Groups, Local Attentiveness, Local Knowledge

Despite the strong consensus that there are too many groups pursuing economic development, a few community figures with whom I spoke highlighted the positive side of having town-based groups. One person said:

I see AVER, GREAT [Groveton Regional Economic Action Team], and the Colebrook and Whitefield development groups as the community organizations. Each has a board of community folks. Though they don't have a staff, they are all volunteers, they are the ones who really know their community, know what they need. A regional group like NCIC needs to learn and understand from those community organizations [what's happening in their communities] because they know what's going on and they know what they need. They just need [more professional NCIC] support because they're volunteers.

Another person pointed out:

For us it seems like with [specific community economic development group], it's basically just a positive voice [for the community], and it gives people a place to share an idea. You don't know where a good idea is going to come from, and we feel like that is kind of a venue for somebody to go to.

Similarly, others commented that having town-based economic groups assured local residents that

someone was watching out for their interests and trying to do something for the community.

There is also strategic value to having local groups. As several interviewees commented, people in Coös don't like to be told what to do by outsiders, including "outsiders" from other Coös communities. One person said:

[Especially in Colebrook] there is suspicion of people coming in from the outside and imposing ideas from the outside. To a certain extent, that's really true anywhere. People don't like outsiders coming in and telling them what they need to change. You're more successful in getting change if you get buy-in from local people and have them lead the change, as opposed to bringing the idea in from the outside and attempting to show local people what a great idea something is.

Another commented:

It's interesting now, how this whole debate about the rejuvenation of Berlin...where you get people from all over the county telling you what to do and they don't even live here and don't even come here. The Randolph crowd, the Shelburne crowd, and some of them, it's interesting, they're twenty miles away and they'll be telling you what you should be doing, and I think that goes by the Yankee thing. This is our turf.

Given local town pride and territorial loyalties, it makes sense that, despite organizational overlap and inefficiency, town-based economic groups can be a valuable conduit between local residents and regional economic organizations. As one leader said:

I don't go to a community and say I think you need this. I go to a community and I talk to people in the community and work with people in the community...and then help them figure out how to deal with the issue or problem they identify.

Local community organizations, moreover, can keep attention directed to local grassroots needs and initiatives. This is especially important at a time when, as another interviewee pointed out, funders often hover with projects that, by pushing for regionalization, may miss—and misunderstand—the on-the-ground everyday realities, both positive and negative, in particular communities.

Regionalization: Constraints and Collaborations

Attachment to local community is a good thing because it provides individuals with social support and a feeling of belonging to, and concern for, something beyond themselves. The geographically dispersed nature of rural life has meant that discrete local communities became relatively self-contained and self-sufficient, characteristics reinforced by the dominance of specific town-based industries and manufacturing companies. In Coös, for example, the dominance of specific paper mill companies in Berlin, Gorham, and Groveton cemented each community's sense of self-sufficiency, and at the same time, their geographical-cultural distance from one another (notwithstanding the fact that only a few miles separates the City of Berlin and the Town of Gorham). As one long-time Coös resident I interviewed reflected:

I think when the mills were in operation, they were almost like little towns within themselves. And they attracted so many people and, you know, such loyalty from the families who worked there.

By the same token, the Colebrook area's self-containment was reinforced by its more isolated northern location and the fact that it was not a mill town.

In rural America today, however, the idea that any particular local community can be a self-contained, self-focused community appears as a less viable economic option. Rural policy makers increasingly emphasize the importance of regional thinking and regional projects that require *inter*-community cooperation. As rural communities shift their economic strategies from a reliance on resource-based manufacturing industry and more toward "community self-development" sectors that emphasize a region's natural and cultural resources such as tourism, alternative energy, and organic farming, inter-community cooperation is critical. If a rural tourist economy is to succeed, or if a rural town's revitalized Main Street, or a local farmers' market or heritage-park is to become and remain economically viable, it is necessary for it to have a regionalized focus, one that attracts customers (and vendors for farmers' markets) from communities outside the town or community in which these attractions and amenities are located.¹² Yet, the viability of county- or region-dependent economic initiatives may be hindered if individuals and communities are not sufficiently attuned to thinking beyond their own local community.

In Coös, many are of the opinion that the county does not think of itself or pull together as a unit. In the survey of community leaders, close to two-thirds, 64 percent, agreed that "Coös residents mostly care about their own local community, and not about the welfare of the whole county." This view is accompanied by a broadly shared consensus among the leaders interviewed that Coös needs to work and strategize as a county/region if it is to make economic progress and improve the well-being of the community as a whole. Many expressed the view, as cogently phrased by one interviewee, that, "We all need to work together to make our community better." At the same time, however, almost all the interviewees expressed acute awareness that working together is difficult for the county to accomplish. One person argued:

We have to reach out. We don't have what we need here, so we have to reach out.... But the people are very territorial, especially up here. We have really small schools like Pittsburgh that manage to have the teams, all the sports teams on their own, and I don't think they're going to give that up easily.... I think it's personal pride, small town pride. People feel if they don't have a school...they'll lose control."

One woman said:

The Berlin mill closing in 2001 showed that we are all too small to make an impact on our own; we need as a county to work together.... We can honor community differences but recognize that we will not get far if we don't focus on the county as a whole.

When I asked her what she saw as the biggest obstacles to working together, she listed the provincialism of individual towns, the rural nature of the county, and the fact that New Hampshire unlike Vermont and many Southern states, does not have a strong county system. A Berlin resident said:

We need to work as a county. It's difficult because you have the eastern, western, and southern parts of the county and it's hard to get everyone together. It's been proven it can work [getting people to support a common thing]. But we have trouble getting along with our sister city down the

street [Gorham]. It's been that way since I've been a kid. And you got to have the conversation. There are times when we can't even start a conversation because people aren't willing to come to the table.... Part of me thinks it's going to be too late [to try to forge cooperation].... I've tried numerous times to get groups together, but they would say, 'If they are going to be there, I don't want to be there.'... It's just communities not getting along with communities at a time when they have to.

Another person noted:

Whether you're looking at schools, whether you're looking at hospitals, or you're looking at communities, fire departments, we built up this sort of internal competition in the county at the elementary school, the middle school, and the high school level for athletics, and we never get over it... Oh, you're from Colebrook, you're a Mohawk, you wear green. I'm from White Mountains, I'm the Spartan, I wear blue. And you're from Groveton, you wear purple. And we just never get over that. So that the cooperative spirit of saying, 'Why don't we just join forces and run one waste water treatment plant or one landfill or one industrial park, or share a police chief, or share an ambulance service?' doesn't come naturally.

One man elaborated:

There are certain divisions within this county. You've got the Lancaster, Groveton, Stark, Stratford section, which is one little corner. Then you've got Gorham and Berlin. Then you've got this Northern section and it's always been like three separate communities and sometimes they grate on each other so we need to learn to work as an entire unit, as an entire county.

When I asked why he thought it's necessary to work as an entire county, he responded, "Because the voice gets louder."

Whether louder or more effective, it is hard to orchestrate a regional voice or to foster a county-wide/regional identity when individuals' and organizations' ties to a particular local community are as deeply embedded as they are in Coös. The emotional and geographical salience of local community identity, highlighted by the interviewees quoted above, is reinforced in the content of

local newspapers. Most of the news reported focuses on what is happening within a relatively narrowly defined community area rather than encompassing events in different parts of the county. This focus is understandable given the dispersed geographical locations of the various newspapers and the financial and logistical constraints impacting news coverage. Nevertheless, the competitive attachment of residents to particular towns is underscored by newspaper headlines emphasizing the inter-town/inter-school rivalry fueled by school sports, as underscored by illustrative headlines such as: "Lady Eagles [Groveton] take down Huskies [Gorham]," "Lady Eagles rise in mill town battle [Groveton vs. Berlin]," and "Spartans step over [big bad] Berlin for title win."¹³

One leader I spoke with argued that the talk currently in Coös about regional thinking and strategizing omits to note that the tourist amenity businesses in the southern part of the county have for many years promoted themselves collaboratively, as evidenced by the White Mountain Attractions Association. Others too mentioned past collaborations, but they also tended to note that these efforts petered out and highlighted the leadership challenges in maintaining such efforts. One person recounted:

There've been several attempts to do regional projects. And they haven't always been successful. Some have been more successful than others. We have a regional economic development team now and I'm not really totally positive how successful they are. But I think they've made the best inroads of any of the groups that have tried to come forward and regionalize things... and there's a group forming as a result of the Ethan Allen closure up in the Colebrook area to look at what the region can do on both sides of the river, in Vermont and New Hampshire. So there's another group that's going to try and do something. So, how do they all come together?... I think [there are overlapping/conflicting agendas]. I mean, I think maybe in the future the region will work better as a region. As far as buying-power and attracting businesses as a region rather than saying 'We want the company.... No, we want the company.' Rather than what's best for the region.... Back in the 90s there was a group called Stay North. It was made up

of people from Stratford, Stark, and Groveton. And Northumberland. I was sort of tangentially involved. They were trying to attract a lot of small businesses to town because they were sort of recognizing that if the mills ever did fail, the town would be, you know, lost. So they had put a lot of emphasis on trying to attract small businesses and helping businesses that were already here to do better. And also they were looking at a bottled water plant on one of the dairy farms in town. But then all of a sudden it just petered out and nothing ever happened.... I think there was a lot of energy and the energy was concentrated in just a few people who really kept things going and then all of a sudden after three or four years, they were like ‘We’ve had it. We can’t do any more.’ And that was it. It was gone. So there weren’t enough people that had that energy that they could sustain for a long period of time. And they didn’t bring in enough other people.... I think they might have had to go slightly outside of the three-town area. To see if they could pull people in from Lancaster or maybe a little farther north in Colebrook and start including them in what they were doing. Maybe people from across the river in Vermont. But still it’s such a local and such a rural little town, and that’s Groveton and this is Lancaster. And what’s the hook to get Lancaster business people involved in what’s happening in Groveton? Even though it has an impact on what’s happening here and they’ve never figured that out.... You know I think people have always known the [regional] connection. But I think most people just are too busy with their own lives to put much effort into it. I think unless you get to a position where you have maybe some extra time in your own life and maybe that means your children have to be grown or you’re not working. They find it hard to get involved. To be part of a committee that’s looking at whatever it is.

In addition to finding leaders with the vision, time, and energy to push regionalization forward, others harkened back to the obstacle posed by inter-town competition, succinctly summarized by one interviewee: “Each town wants to concentrate on its own area.”

Another elaborated:

County commissioners, town managers—their attitude tends to be, ‘This is my town, my area of responsibility.’ ‘We don’t want outsiders telling us what to do.’ ‘We can do it ourselves.’ This causes isolation—Lancaster, Colebrook, Berlin—all separate entities with separate goals and strategies.

Different Communities, Different Realities

Regionalization is a rural policy ideal that may be increasingly necessary to realize today if communities are to sustain themselves. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the everyday “here and now” reality in discrete local communities differs from one locale to the next despite their commonalities. Some interviewees acknowledged this, with one noting:

If you think of Coös County, from here to Pittsburg, it’s a long ways and there are a lot of differences. Probably Pittsburg’s reality is different than Whitefield’s reality at this point.

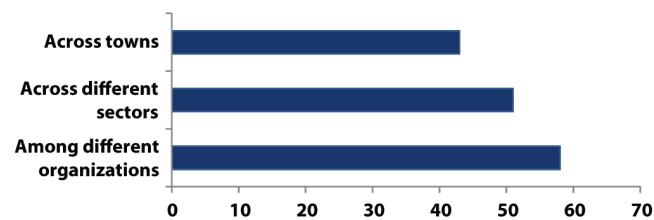
Another similarly pointed out that all of the main towns in Coös have their own unique character with strengths and quirks that make these locales attractive to their residents. This person, while appreciative of the relevance of a regional voice and a regional identity, thus argued that it was somewhat unreasonable to expect that all communities despite some similarities would need or want the same things. This view was echoed in the perspective of another leader from a different community, who argued:

We keep hearing that all of our towns are isolated and that we need to work together. But we really are isolated and we need to begin acting that way and thus coming up with economic development models that recognize local realities and build on the specific resources in our local communities.

Notwithstanding the press of different local community realities and the specific challenges each confronts, there is an emerging sense in Coös that an ethos of community cooperation is growing. In the survey of community leaders, a majority said that cooperation among different organizations (58 percent) and across different sectors (51 percent) is getting better, and 43 percent said that cooperation across towns and communities in Coös is getting

better (see Figure 6). Further, when asked in an open-ended question to name one specific improvement that they have noticed in Coös since 2009, the modal response among community leaders surveyed was cooperation among communities, organizations, or individuals—an assessment expressed by 40 percent of respondents.

FIGURE 6. PERCENTAGE OF COMMUNITY LEADERS SURVEYED WHO AGREED THAT COOPERATION IS GETTING BETTER



Regionalization Achievements

It is evident that, despite the challenges in crafting regional identities and collaborations, inter-organizational and inter-town cooperation are realizable goals in Coös. During the short interval of this study, various collaborative projects took hold. One example of successful inter-organizational cooperation is demonstrated by the Coös Family Support Project (CFSP), a collaboration of seven different child and family service providers located in different towns in Coös.¹⁴ The CFSP was funded and encouraged by the Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. Its success is also due in no small part to the energetic, disciplined, and committed participation of its organizational-member representatives. Despite the practical challenges (such as travel time and weather concerns) of meeting as a group once a month and despite the myriad pressing demands of members' own particular work schedules, the CFSP has accomplished a lot in a relatively short span of time.

Their cooperative achievements include the implementation of evaluation-based research with Coös children and families; the securing of additional funds from, and the establishment of a good reputation with, diverse funders; the establishment of a website; the articulation of a political voice for Coös children; the organization of well-attended conferences on early childhood development and its relation to community economic development; and the implementation of several new initiatives in Coös aimed at improving the content and delivery of programs enhancing early childhood developmental screening, literacy, physical and mental health, and related family support services.¹⁵ Importantly, too, despite some changes in personnel over the past three years, the CFSP has also managed to maintain a cohesive identity and lively group spirit and to continue to function effectively. This suggests that while individual personality characteristics certainly matter to group functioning, once a group structure is in place, the group can accomplish its organizational goals independent of the particular uniqueness of its members.

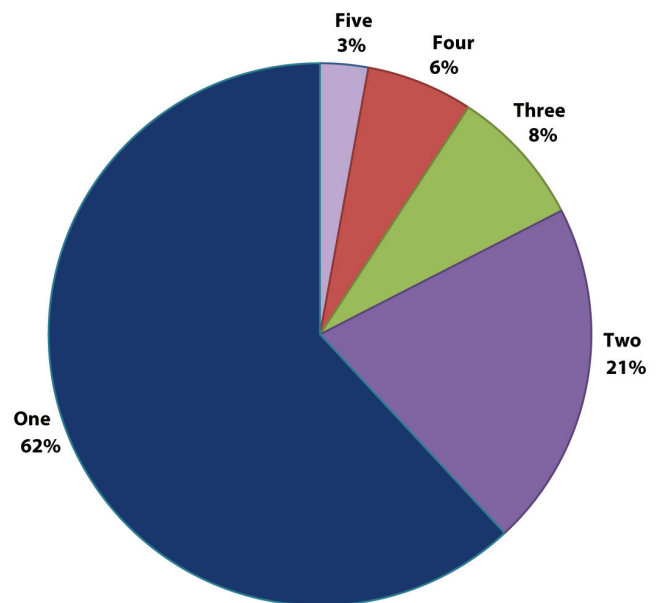
Other examples of recent ongoing collaborations in Coös that are effective include the Mountain View Academy, a hospitality training program for high school juniors and seniors established between the Mountain View Grand Resort and Spa and White Mountains Regional High School; the 45th Parallel Emergency Medical Services, a private, not-for-profit corporation across several northern Coös communities; increased cooperation in service provision between the county's three hospitals; and the cooperation of the county's five Chambers of Commerce with the Branding Project (BP), thus contributing to the county-wide "NH Grand" tourism marketing initiative.¹⁶ It is of further interest in regard to cooperative ventures and their likely positive impact in building a regional identity that, in the survey of community leaders, the second most frequently identified specific improvement in Coös, was the BP's "NH Grand" and related tourism and amenity improvement activities, suggested by 13 percent of the respondents.¹⁷

Regionalizing Connections: The Coös Symposium

One important initiative in Coös that has been instrumental in building connections and collaborative relationships among individuals and organizations across the county has been the Coös symposium. The symposium, first held in 2007, is a region-wide, annual networking event for community leaders. It is partly sponsored by The Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. The Fund's Advisory Committee is committed to enhancing the quality of life in Coös and does so through several grant-making initiatives.¹⁸ The three-day symposium, held in May at one of the grand resort hotels in Coös amid beautiful surroundings, hosts about one-hundred invited participants. Invitees, chosen by the Symposium Planning Committee (composed of Coös stakeholders, Foundation employees, and representatives from the symposium's other sponsors), include community and organizational leaders from across the county and the broader region, as well as representatives from relevant government and non-profit organizations. Each year, the committee actively seeks to include new participants; of the approximately 315 people who have attended the symposium, 62 percent have attended just once, 21 percent have attended twice, and 17 percent have attended at least three times (see Figure 7).

A primary purpose of the symposium is building and strengthening connections among the participants. At the opening of each symposium, participants formally introduce themselves in a personal way to the whole group by not only stating their name and institutional affiliation but also sharing what, for example, they most love about Coös or something new they discovered about Coös, or a way that someone in Coös whom they talked to thinks it could be improved. These introductions are deliberately planned by the symposium committee in advance and all participants are made aware of some such pre-symposium assignment a few weeks prior to arriving at the event. Across the three days, participants have many varied opportunities to chat and get to know each other, hear formal presentations about specific initiatives underway in the area, participate in semi-structured small group discussions about the various ongoing projects, and brainstorm in a focused manner about ways to improve the region. As participants

FIGURE 7. YEARS OF PARTICIPATION IN THE COÖS SYMPOSIUM



are reminded time and again during this very sociable and engaging event, the symposium is an intentional and explicit effort to build social ties in and for the region. Each year's symposium agenda carries the same heading: "To connect the dots person to person, organization to organization, community to community, and to build relationships and trust across communities." The cooperative relationship building is strategic, that is, it is intended to contribute to achieving change in Coös. Thus, the symposium also aims to "deepen understanding of the local, regional, and global forces shaping the region, and of the potential levers of change." In short, the symposium's objective, as stated in each year's program is: "Advancing North Country Connections, Dialogue and Action."¹⁹

At the first symposium, held in 2007, participants in breakout group sessions were asked to discuss the question: "What would help the region work even better together on initiatives already underway in the region, and how? The answer is not always or only 'Money!' What, if anything is keeping us stuck—so that we don't work together as much as we might? And what might help unstick us, or encourage us, to work together?" The emphasis

on the strategic importance of cooperative relationships was most explicit during the 2010 symposium when a special session was devoted to a presentation on how social ties help to advance communities' social and economic well-being.²⁰ The clear message explicitly communicated at each symposium is that the region's development is dependent on individuals and communities working together to create jobs, to strengthen the area's institutions, and to build a sustainable community for individuals and families. The symposium, with its emphasis on sociability, and through the various ways in which its structure facilitates connections between people—for example, scheduled times requiring people to introduce themselves; to “buddy-up” with individuals they don't know; and ongoing opportunities to talk with others in rotating small group discussions—makes its invitees increase the number of people they get to know (or get to know better than they had prior to the symposium). By extension, these expanded social ties expand individuals' access to the resources such as information, expertise, and additional personal connections, embedded in these connections/social networks.

Many of my interviewees had participated in the symposium at least once, and almost all of them spoke favorably of the opportunities for information sharing and social networking that it provided. And, although several of the interviewees are already well-networked, they nonetheless welcome the symposium as an additional opportunity to further expand their social network and to hear about what other individuals and organizations in the county are doing to improve the area's quality of life. Several people highlighted, in particular, how it encourages collaborative relationships across the county. One person said:

The symposium has made my job so much easier because you have two or three days with all these people that are very well connected in the county. People come up to me and say, ‘You should really get in touch with this person,’ or ‘Get in touch with this person,’ ‘Here is my card.’ So the symposium has done wonders as far as connecting parts of the county. I know we still have issues with different places having tunnel vision so that has helped them see the broader picture. I wish everyone could get to the symposium every year. I think it is extremely helpful.

Another commented:

The symposium is critical. I was stunned at how people started working together at the first one, and more stunned that this is continuing and continuing in stronger ways—people developing collaborative relationships.... The symposium is one of the strongest things that has pushed collaboration.

Another echoed this view:

The symposium is interesting and I enjoyed it. It's a great way to make connections. I think it's a fascinating project.... It fascinates me. The idea of bringing together people and getting them to think about the future. I think it's a great idea.... You do get a chance to talk to people although you know a large percentage of the people there already. I think what's neat about it is having the chance to have focused discussions with a cross-section of different people from the county. You form some new relationships. You meet some new people, but a lot of it is being able to get together a diverse group and talk about things.

A person who first attended the symposium in 2010, said:

I liked it mostly as a networking situation because I met a lot of people that I can draw on for other things, and other people are already drawing on me, so that kind of thing works. Some great ideas came out of there.... There were some ‘aha moments,’ great ideas that you can use anywhere.

Others too explicitly emphasized the value of the information and ideas shared and how that has, or can, help them in their work and in building broad-based support for county-wide initiatives. One person remarked:

I got good feedback at a symposium workshop.... I got ideas about how to get our message out so that it is more effective. We will target our audience, focus more on business leaders, municipal people, key decision makers.

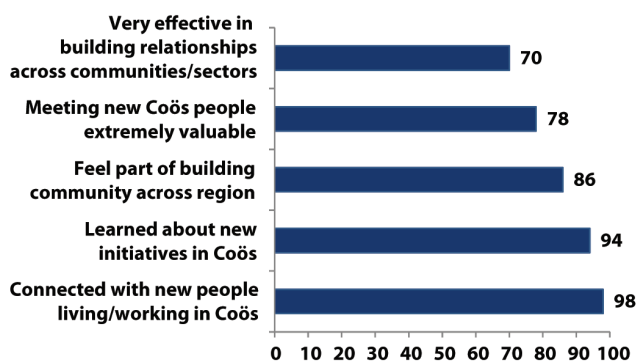
Another elaborated:

I think the symposium has been wonderful, not just for [the discussion of specific Coös projects] but for bringing people together that might not ordinarily come together and you have an

audience of 100 people to discuss [various projects], and if they buy in to it you've now got 100 more people that will help you sell the project to the community, support the project. When they hear about it, they can say, 'I know about that, it's a good thing.' So, it's I think a huge part of that sort of community-building or support-building for projects...whatever the project might be.

The positive views of the symposium expressed by the community leaders interviewed are also supported by the findings from post-symposium anonymous internet surveys of the attendees conducted by the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. Even though a good proportion are return invitees and who, as community leaders, are already well-networked, 98 percent said that they connected with new people working and living in the Coös region, and 94 percent said they learned, or learned more, about new initiatives happening in Coös. Large majorities also agreed that meeting new people living and working in Coös was an "extremely valuable" component of the symposium (78 percent), that they themselves feel a part of building community throughout the region (86 percent), and that the symposium was "very effective" in building relationships and trust across communities and disciplines" (70 percent; see Figure 8).²¹

FIGURE 8. PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS OF THE COÖS SYMPOSIUM



The effectiveness of the symposium in building connections among the participants is bolstered by the fact that the event is characterized by a cooperative rather than competitive environment. Although participants have to attend to task-oriented activities, much of the interaction at the symposium is intentionally social; the task is to cooperate and get connected and this is outlined and achieved under affirming and hospitable

conditions. Further, the regularity of the event and the overlapping composition of the participants also contribute to its effectiveness because individuals are more likely to form social ties with one another if they have structured opportunities to do so and if, in addition to their own personal agency and motivation, they are mobilized by a third party to do so.²²

One drawback to the symposium is that although the participants encompass a broad swath of people from across different occupational sectors and geographical locales in Coös, elected politicians have had a relatively minimal presence at the event. The role of local politicians in community economic regeneration is a source of tension in general, however, in rural and urban settings. The tension emanates largely as a result of concern among economic development and other community leaders that, in evaluating economic initiatives, politicians tend to prioritize political considerations rather than the common good of the whole community.²³ In this regard, some of the community leaders I interviewed were critical of the lack of economic leadership and vision shown by Coös' officials. One businessman, for example, said:

I'd like to think that the county commissioners could take a lead role, but they haven't been able to do that because they are on their own pedestals that they built themselves. We need to clean house.

Others similarly criticized the commissioners for politicizing various economic development initiatives (for example, the branding project). One person who was not involved in any way with the Branding Project said,

We'd have a more cohesive [economic development structure], but the commissioners have been so vindictive and have been so politically domineering, or ideologically driven, that they scare the professional person away. Somebody like me would say I'd never work with somebody like that on a professional basis.... they have to be put back in their place. They have a function and they're not gods.... At the end of the day...they [are supposed]...to serve the people.

Business owners and executives also tend to be under-represented at the symposium, largely due to the time commitment imposed by attendance at the event. One interviewee commented:

I think of the symposium and I think of, you know, it's not that the wrong people are there.

It's just that all the right people aren't there. We do need those business leaders, such as they are, whoever they are.... I think they...understand what's best for the community.

The paucity of business representation at the symposium may account, in part, for what one interviewee saw as a major drawback of the gathering, namely, the lack of attention to the issue of large-scale job creation. He said:

I'm a little baffled. I enjoyed myself, yes, but they did not focus...on the real issues in my opinion.... Jobs, number one, and schools, school costs, number two.... It's nice that everybody is focusing on Coös County because we are the poor stepchild to the rest of the state, but they're not addressing the real issue.... Small-scale projects [like] connecting farmers with each other so we can have fresh fruits and vegetables locally sourced. That's small scale. That's not going to cure any ills. It may cure one farmer's ills but not the county's ills, and I thought that's what the symposium's focus should be on.

In a systematic attempt by the 2011 symposium committee to reach out to and incorporate businesses, participants on the first day of the 2011 symposium had to do a pre-arranged “discovery tour” of specific businesses in a specific part of the county. Participants' subsequent accounts of their tours were overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic; many commented on how, despite being long-time residents of particular Coös communities, visiting these businesses and meeting their owners/executives and workers deeply enhanced their knowledge and appreciation of the business sector in Coös.

Nevertheless, the smaller presence of politicians and business people at this—the only event in Coös with an intentional county-wide focus—may tacitly foster a sense of “us versus them” in deliberations over the region's future, and inadvertently attenuate the trust between important community stakeholders. One person I interviewed said that he did not like the occasional feeling of “smugness” and exclusivity that he gets at the symposium, noting that smugness “is not what the county is about.” Instead, he and others I interviewed believe that “it's better to have people inside the tent than outside it.” Inclusivity is more likely than exclusivity to contribute to the strategic goal of inter-individual and inter-organizational, county-wide cooperation because, as one person commented, “People who go to the symposium will support one another; others

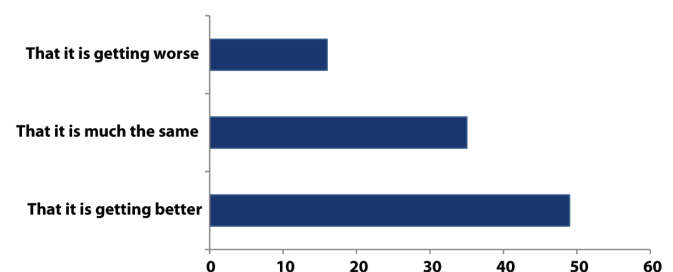
will not want to co-operate. An awful lot of opinions and politics gets in the way of cooperation.”

Political tensions do not dissipate easily. Reflecting on the symposium, one interviewee said:

I remember the last break-out session we had [at the 2010 symposium], where we were working in a group to look at the symposium and how we could make it better and so on. And I think our group really seized on the fact that the people who need the messages from that group aren't there. And they likely will never feel that energy the way you feel the energy if you're in the room. And yet, if you invite them to the event, it's like having a skunk at a picnic. [Elected officials] really can bring you down.... We absolutely stayed away from elected officials [in developing the Coös Economic Action Plan, a voluntary committee of business and other community leaders] because it just doesn't seem like [they add anything positive]; it seems like they're always trailing the public.

In sum, despite its drawbacks, the symposium provides a structurally important, county-wide venue for the building and dissemination of knowledge about Coös, and for the generation and reaffirmation of collaborative connections within, across, and beyond Coös. The social interaction that occurs there focuses its participants on the county as a unit and contributes to affirming and revitalizing participants' commitment to working together toward ensuring the economic and social viability of the county as a whole. It may also play a role in community leaders' assessment that “pride in Coös as a county” is getting better, a view expressed by a plurality (49 percent) of respondents in the survey of community leaders. By contrast, only 16 percent said that pride in Coös as a county was getting worse, while 35 percent said that it was much the same now as it was two years ago (see Figure 9).

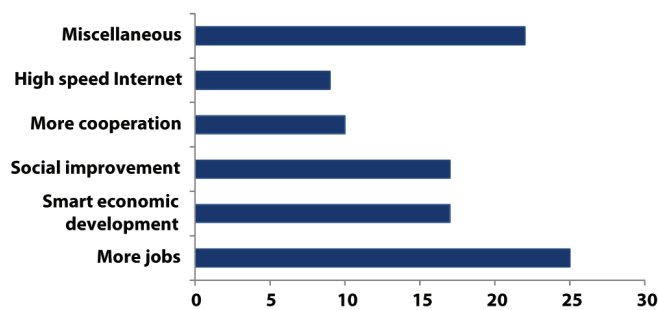
FIGURE 9. LEADERS' ASSESSMENT OF WHETHER PRIDE IN COÖS AS A COUNTY HAS CHANGED SINCE 2009



Debating Economic Progress: Jobs Versus Sustainability and Quality of Life

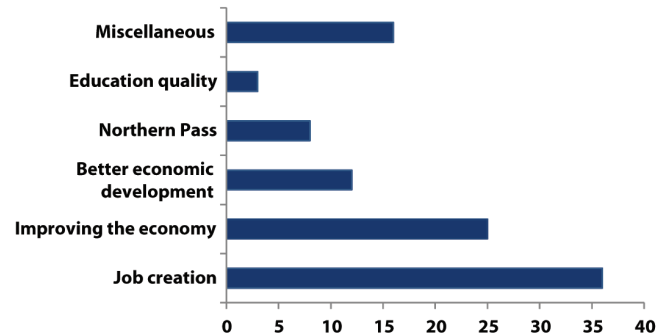
In Coös, as elsewhere, economic development is a difficult task. The challenge is all the more complicated today. On the one hand, the increased competitive environment resulting from economic globalization pushes communities the world over to pounce on whatever employment-creation opportunities they can identify. On the other hand, increased public awareness of the costs of economic progress and concerns about the quality of life and environmental sustainability invite a wary skepticism toward many economic development initiatives. Coös lives this tension first-hand. Although there is widespread concern about the lack of jobs and the limited opportunities for job creation, there is also strong interest in maintaining a good quality of life. When asked an open-ended question about one specific change they would like to see in Coös, the responses of 25 percent of the community leaders surveyed were categorized as indicating “More jobs,” and those of an additional 17 percent were categorized as indicating “Smart economic development” (see Figure 10).

FIGURE 10. LEADERS’ VIEWS OF ONE CHANGE THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE IN COÖS



By the same token, over a third (36 percent) see job creation as the main challenge facing Coös in the near-term future, a quarter (25 percent) see improving the economy and the economic infrastructure, and 12 percent see better economic development as the main challenges (see Figure 11). Leaders are well aware, moreover, that these imperatives have to be balanced with respect for residents’ interests; a large majority (64 percent) of

FIGURE 11. LEADERS’ VIEWS OF THE MAIN CHALLENGE FACING COÖS



the community leaders surveyed and that “Most people in Coös value quality of life over personal financial gain.”

While all the community leaders I interviewed are sincerely committed to ensuring the well-being of Coös, there is disagreement about what this entails. Some tend to emphasize the immediate practical payoff of “jobs, jobs, jobs,” whereas others tend to push for a more qualitative and long-term perspective. This tension, however, does not follow a dogmatic or clear-cut gap between, for example, business owners or economic development leaders and those outside these sectors, or between leaders who have lived outside of Coös and those who have never left the county. Rather, many interviewees took a nuanced and contextualized, case-by-case approach to the issue. Some leaders involved in economic development said that it was their job to focus on job creation and the “net cash flow to the community,” and to not get side-tracked by social issues. Others emphasized that it is not simply jobs they want to create, but high-paying, high quality jobs that would provide individuals and families with a good standard of living. As one person said:

When I first took this job, I was over in [specific town] with a group of economic development people who were excited about low-paying jobs; they were surprised because I said, ‘We need to move away from low-paying jobs.’

In line with this view of the importance of creating high-paying jobs, some interviewees expressed concern about the move in Coös toward expanding or relying on tourism. While some argued that Coös is “ripe for tourism development,” others had strong reservations about its economic value. One life-long Coös resident argued, “Tourism cannot survive without the industrial base. Tourism service jobs cannot compete with the wages of the mills.” Another elaborated,

Tourist economies won’t bring in much money. I think as we get better Internet connectivity, high-speed internet, my hope is that we’ll get more high-tech industry, small businesses, things of that nature, and perhaps because of the proximity to Canada. So far at least I don’t think that’s really happened up here.

Similar arguments were expressed by others:

What bothers me most is that they are pushing tourism jobs and to me those are not desirable jobs. A lot of them are seasonal, a lot of them are small businesses that can’t offer good benefits. I don’t like to see us put all our energies into tourism. We can’t guarantee we’re going to have snow anymore. Then you have the winter season that people are dependent on and it doesn’t snow, and the snowmobilers don’t come.

Berlin right now is stuck with the haves and have-nots. I’m a have, but you look at everybody else who needs work and you’ve got people who want us to be a tourist city. I don’t want us to be a tourist city, because tourism is not [viable]. You go to a town that’s pure tourism and you won’t see Mercedeses parked everywhere & Cadillacs, you’ll see Chevy pickup trucks because it’s minimal living. It’s got a good living for the managers, but the workers, which is the bulk of them, still aren’t making the kind of money that you’re looking for. And it’s not, it goes up and down, it’s not a steady trade, it’s not year-round, and they don’t get paid benefits, which is another problem.

A person in a different part of the county said:

I’m really worried we’re going to become a tourism-based economy. Nobody wants to live in a tourism based economy. It’s terrible...because you have

low-wage jobs, like cabin-cleaners, and waitresses, and bus-boys. You don’t have a lot of high-wage jobs, professional jobs. Quite frankly, it just becomes a playground area for a lot of people. And some of those people are fantastic. They’re great people, but I don’t think anybody wants to feel like they’re just caretakers for somebody else’s playground. Then your economy becomes mostly people who are coming up here to just play temporarily or buying second homes up here. And the locals will not be able to afford to buy the property. It’s already happening a little bit.

Beyond tourism, one businessman emphasized the importance of job creation and making Coös hospitable to new companies. He argued:

I don’t think that at this point in time we can really pick and choose a lot. We’re in a position where if somebody’s willing to bring in a company that...can employ people and can be stable and be part of the community, I think we need to open our arms and bring those people in and say ‘Thank you.’ Because it’s not like another part of the country where we’re going to have a tech center. It’s just not. If somebody’s willing and able, we ought to open our arms up and do whatever we can to assist them and get them here, and up and going, and make them a permanent member of the community...but I do see there is opposition to the bio-mass plant. And it’s an example. I say to myself, I scratch my head and say, well what’s the downside? Where’s the downside here? Because I think you’ve got to look at the big picture. We need to have that support. People need to have jobs to pay their bills, to buy cars, to buy groceries, pay their real estate taxes. Again, our opportunities are limited.... Especially when we’re in the situation we’re in. If people are trying to do business, we ought to be their partner. How do we partner with these people and get them where they need to go rather than be a road block?”

Another person echoed this sentiment, stating:

We need to make things happen here and that’s not happening. Case in point, they’ve cut the education budget, but they have budgeted \$100,000 to fight Laidlaw. Laidlaw is coming into Berlin, so

why don't we work with them and try to get the most from them instead of working with them adversarially? To me it's a no-brainer.

Many interviewees welcomed the job creation and ancillary economic impact of the unopened but ready-for-use Berlin federal prison. One person who lives outside the Berlin/Gorham area said:

You know, a lot of people think prison jobs aren't good jobs. Prison jobs are great jobs. I mean, you think about the demographic that's going to be moving into Berlin and the surrounding area. These are people who will be making between \$50,000 to \$100,000—and that's just the one person who is the prison worker, and whatever the wife or husband does on top of that. So you're going to have your schools impacted positively, your downtown Berlin is I think primed to take off, and you're talking 300 and something jobs and ancillary jobs that come off of that. So build as many prisons as you want.

A Coös native who returned to the area also welcomed the positive economic impact of the prison employees, and acknowledged too that they would change “the face of the community.” Some interviewees were welcoming of the prison precisely because of the positive social impact its employees might have on the community. One person who is highly involved in many different community activities said:

I'm looking forward to the families coming with the federal prison because it should change the complexion of the community.... It will be more diverse than what Berlin is used to.... That's wonderful. I'm hoping to get them on boards and committees and get different points of view. Out with the old and in with the new. And maybe we can make something with what we have here.

Others, however, while welcoming the diversity, were more wary of the prison's potential negative impact on the community:

People are so desperate for jobs and something to spark the economy that I think they're putting their eggs in a basket that's going to cause nothing but trouble.... Well, the people who work in a federal prison in particular are by design transitory.... In the federal system they tend

to rotate their staff, and I think the idea is that the staff doesn't get too close to the prisoners, or corruption. I don't know what it is, but from what I'm told they tend to rotate in and out so I think that might be an issue.... They come in and out every three years, which means it's going to undercut some of the social cohesion in the North Country... I've also heard that domestic violence, alcohol, drug use, etc. is higher among prison staff.... I just cringe at the thought of prisons being a growth industry. And to a certain extent I'm sure there will be people discharged from the prisons, which will be difficult for the communities to adjust to. I'm sure there will be good things too, more community diversity.

Some interviewees were equally in favor of casinos and prisons. One argued:

I would be a huge supporter [of casinos].... Of course, up here, recreation is the big thing. I think that's the direction that this community can be most successful, is to continue to drive that recreation engine. And keep touting that recreation aspect and the skiing and the snowmobiling and the summertime and all that type of thing. And again to that recreation point, I think a casino is a good fit. I think that it's one of those things...and probably the most controversial thing that ever happened in this community was to bring in the state prison. There was a lot of chatter. There was a lot of talk. But you know, living in the community, there's days when I probably forget it's even here. Because it's so far out of reach, so far out of touch. It really, it's a seamless event that happened. There have been no issues with that prison. And now that we worked so well, we did such a good job that the federal prison decided to come in right behind it. Now I don't think anybody's proud to say we're a prison town or whatever. But at the end of the day, that was a seamless deal. So the casinos I look at as the same thing. I think that once it is in, it's seamless. I think that where it's located and the proposed sites, I think that it's a great idea. I think that it would drive a lot of people to the area...golf, outdoor activities, snowmobiling, skiing. And I think that would go hand in hand [with a casino]. So I would be a huge supporter of that.

Others, however, who supported the prison were adamantly opposed to casinos. One said:

I'm concerned because of the law enforcement. There are studies that show that those people who shouldn't go, go to casinos. You will see an increase in alcohol abuse. There will be an increase in domestic violence. That's not what this community needs right now. And the jobs are not high paying jobs; they are all minimum wage. We won't get companies like IBM or Microsoft. What we need is 20 companies that employ about 40 people each. Then all of a sudden you have 800 jobs.

Another interviewee was similarly opposed:

The casino. I'm just flat against it.... Why propagate a social ill for revenue?... I don't buy [the various casino revenue projections]. And is it worth it? Because, you know, the kids will suffer, there are people that could lose their homes and right now it's harder for them because of that. Police calls will go up. All those factors. How are we going to pay for that?... I just don't see that it's worth it. You don't try to solve something by going to something that's not taking the high road. Saying that gambling is going to solve our problems.... No, I'm against it. I just can't see how that's logical. It's the wrong way to go. If we want to turn the Coös economy around, then we try to figure out ways to keep folks in their house, develop incentives to get a company to come in and take a chance. Because there are good people here, and if you get a decent job, and they feel like they're valued, they'll go to work.

Yet another interviewee expressed similar moral outrage and argued in favor of high-quality jobs and community sustainability, stating:

It's almost as though there's two Coös. And there's a Coös that is the safe comfy, old-shoe perspective. And then there's the new perspective that's far more edgy, far more outspoken. Far more accountable and has maybe loftier goals. Has a loftier view. And so I've said we have to find something more. We have to find higher efficiencies. We have to find higher return and that seems to be the crux, that too many people in the county have become desperate for the first shiny

nickel. So anything is better... I mean really, when you start going down the route of gambling and you won't even look at a broad-based tax, it seems to me that you've kind of split off the moral divide. You've gone down the amoral road. As I look at how we're going to operate the county, I would really like to think that we could establish this county as a model for sustainability of our resources, efficiency, and low energy prices.

A person who grew up in Coös highlighted the larger community identity questions that the various job-creation proposals raise, saying:

I'm not excited about a federal prison coming here. I hope that doesn't label us in a negative way. I'm very concerned about, well, with it being known in the past as a stinky town with the mill, that we don't end up with another name.... A casino would be a terrible idea.... I just don't see it attracting the kind of people that I would like.... I just think we should play off our natural resources. Casinos are about being indoors. We have one of the most beautiful places in the country, so why would we hop into something that doesn't even involve nature?... So I think building our trail system...so we have beautiful trails all over the place. We have an incredible edge, like the auto-road had a bike race up Mt. Washington a while ago. We had the word out about that bike race. People spent a ton of money here last weekend. The casino people are sitting inside a casino, gambling, and losing their money.... It feels to me like people are looking for the next big fix, the next big mill, or the next big prison, or the next big casino. I think that the future really will be in more small businesses.

Another person simply said, "I don't see gambling happening [in the North Country], because that would totally desecrate everything we have up here."

The importance of conserving what is authentic and unique to the North Country was further elaborated by a person in the Lancaster area, who said:

If you look at Conway and see what's going on there, I'm not sure it's all positive. I think it's good that people are looking at where the community assets are, and if we're marketing that, people will

come here. Hopefully people will appreciate that. And hopefully the people here will be protective of what we have here. It's a constant battle trying to keep awareness of that.... I think that we have to diversify. The small jobs are the backbone. The small jobs make it work. My issue...is to preserve our rural character. Just the simple wonders that are our way of life that are still pretty unique, and I don't want that to get lost. I think that the rush of economic development scares us.... My concern is not that Berlin is going to creep over here but that Littleton is going to creep over here. It's a reality.... In bad economic times, there's talk about all sorts of things [campgrounds, drag-racing, casinos].... People are clamoring for jobs. Anything they can get... I'm not talking about closing up the doors and not letting anyone up here. But I'm talking about preserving and celebrating what we've got.... We shouldn't forget

why we attract people here and why they keep coming here. What I'm trying to do is make sure we don't forget what we have here.

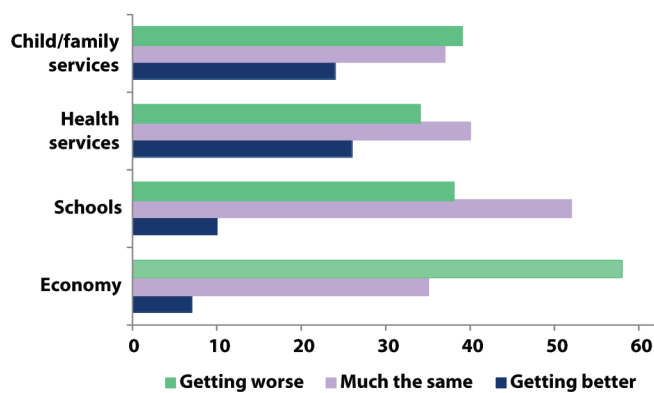
Moving forward to create an economically strong and sustainable region, while not forgetting what Coös has, is a challenge that also fits with the desires of Coös residents as a whole, large percentages of whom, it will be recalled, highly value the region's natural beauty and quality of life. In the 2010 CERA survey, 82 percent of the respondents said that tourism recreation development, and 72 percent said that forest-based development, were very important to Coös's future. At the same time, there is evidence that no single approach dominates residents' views of the way forward; 37 percent of residents said that they thought it was more important to use natural resources to create jobs, 38 percent said it was more important to conserve their community's natural resources for future generations, and 25 percent said that both were equally important.

Belief in the Future of Coös

Population trends in Coös have stabilized and a variety of economic initiatives are moving forward in the county (for example, the purchase of the Gorham Fraser mill, the repurposing of the Groveton mill, Laidlaw, and the promotion of the “NH Grand” brand). Nevertheless, the multifaceted impact of the ongoing national recession on businesses, economic growth, social and health services, and individual and family spending habits is felt in Coös. Even in the short interval of this study (2009–2011), new, highly visible, and impactful economic losses accumulated. Ethan Allen, a major employer in the northern part of the county, located in Beecher Falls, Vermont, just a few short miles from Colebrook and Pittsburg, shut down; a highly regarded Berlin-based manufacturing business filed for bankruptcy; and the famed Balsams hotel in Dixville Notch, currently under new local ownership, is closed for extensive renovations. Reflecting the community anguish imposed by economic uncertainty, over half (58 percent) of the community leaders surveyed in the summer of 2011 said that the Coös economy is getting worse, one-third (35 percent) said it is much the same as it was in 2009, and fewer than one in ten (7 percent) said it is getting better (see Figure 12).

At the same time, some new projects that might

FIGURE 12. LEADERS’ ASSESSMENT OF DIFFERENT SECTORS IN COÖS IN 2011 COMPARED TO 2009



generate future revenue are sources of controversy; the Northern Pass is one such project and places in sharp relief the tension in economic development between the

marketing of the pristine beauty of a region against the backdrop of a project that proposes to place large electricity-generating poles across parts of the visible landscape that are breathtakingly beautiful.

Given that economic momentum in Coös tends to follow a two-steps-forward, one-step-back model, it is not surprising that some community leaders are currently not optimistic about its future. Although it is a minority opinion, 21 percent of community leaders surveyed said that they were not optimistic about the future of Coös, and a similar proportion (23 percent) said they were not optimistic about their own or their family’s future in Coös (see Figure 13). A few of the leaders I personally interviewed also expressed a lack of optimism. One person emphasized that “there is very little [economic] growth” in Coös, while another elaborated:

The North Country is not doing well at all. Small businesses are struggling, timber harvesting always has its ups and downs, a loss of good jobs. The Colebrook hospital is struggling...businesses can’t afford to borrow, and banks can’t afford the risks. I don’t see any immediate recovery for the area. There is not enough economic development to sustain us long-term.

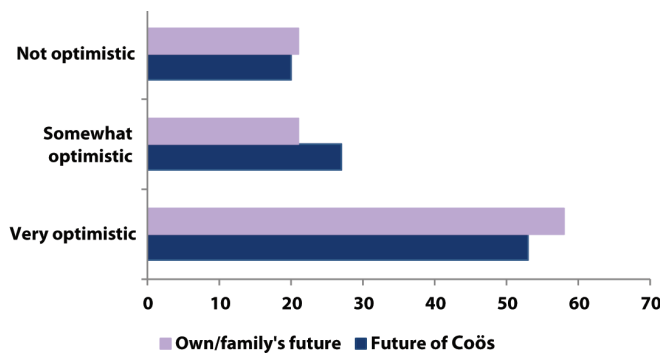
Indeed, the economic strains on one organization are such that one executive, though actively exploring several cost-saving possibilities, wistfully acknowledged:

We are not going to be able to continue [doing what we do]. We are looking at several options and evaluating what are the basics that we need to do to continue.... We will look at whether there are any opportunities to do things differently... I don’t know the answers. We have a lot of work to do. We need to maintain something here. Realistically, I am not sure we can continue to do what we do.

A person in a different sector echoed the challenges of working in a highly constrained environment, and emphasized getting “burnt-out beyond belief” because of the day-to-day challenges involved in trying to maintain a successful organization against the backdrop of depleted financial and personnel resources.

Most of the people I interviewed, however, and a majority (53 percent) of those surveyed were very optimistic about the future of Coös, with an additional quarter (25 percent) of the survey respondents somewhat optimistic. Largely similar proportions were optimistic about their own or their family's future (see Figure 13).

FIGURE 13. LEADERS' OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE



Some interviewees qualified their optimism with an acute awareness of the urgency of the economic needs in the region coupled with the fact that change occurs slowly. One person reflected:

I think the thing that overwhelms me the most is when there is so much to do in such a small period of time, and I know we need to do things quickly. I know there are people losing their jobs every day; they are going on the day-to-day, 'How am I going to pay the bills?' and we are having to come back to them and say, 'You have to wait a little.' We are going as fast as we can, but we can't go any faster than we are. It kills me to say wait another three months to people, while in another three months these people may not have a penny left. So that has been tough.

Another said:

I think that there's a lot of potential in Coös, a lot of projects that are on the horizon.... There's a lot of potential, but I think that there are some families where one or two in the family have lost their jobs as a result of the mill closures or whatever else, and those families are really struggling to stay in the area. So...I see all of this potential, but from the day-to-day lives of some of the people I know in the communities, it's a real struggle for them.

Another person argued:

It's a challenge every day.... There's a lot of problems and obstacles, but I remain an optimist every day that things are getting better. Look at the Wassau plant. It's been closed for going on two years this winter, and it's been a long process to get it to a position so that it can be repurposed for other business. But it's getting there, there's light at the end of the tunnel. We're nearing the end of that beginning, and we're going to start a new phase where we can really repurpose it. The folks in Groveton wanted it to go seamlessly from a paper mill into something else that's successful. It doesn't work that way, there's just too many potholes in the way.... So, I see the pitfalls, but I still think overall, we're better positioned [than we were].

Some who were optimistic about Coös were positive simply because as one said, "I'm always optimistic about the area—maybe too optimistic. That's why I returned [several years ago]." Others pointed to specific changes in Coös as grounds for optimism. A few people commented, for example, on the increased cooperation in the county, such as one who said:

Things have changed; there is more unity, more teamwork. There is a lot of fighting spirit in Coös; we have a history of survival and independence... and now we are trying to combine that energy and pull on the same rope.

Another said:

I think that there is more sense of community now more than ever. Probably because when the chips are down people try to gain some support through each other. I think that the community business is probably stronger than it's ever been, and I think the Chamber has had a large hand in that. It's a very strong Chamber now compared to where we were two or three years ago. So I agree that that's probably the way we're trending.

The other positive aspects that interviewees identified encompassed a broad range of specific things, as the following quotes illustrate:

I'm optimistic. It's not all about the brain drain. We have excellent schools...though the hospitals are in a tough economic situation.

I am hopeful about Coös County. In a room recently with about thirty-five other people, we were asked this same question—and we all said, ‘Yes.’ There is optimism. There is a lot of hope in my circle of professionals...and among students. If you drive past WMCC, you will see a full parking lot.

I think there’s some reason for optimism, despite the poor economy right now...and despite the real economic crisis in Groveton right now that I’m really worried about.... We’re lucky to have DRED...recruiting businesses into the area. And I think AVER has been good. There’s groups up in Colebrook too, working with the banks.... St. Kieran’s is a wonderful place, just amazing. The Colonel Town in Lancaster is a real driver. The arts initiative going on up in Colebrook, starting up, that’s very exciting too. The idea of getting the Tillotson Center going, I think that’s another reason for optimism. There’s been some nice efforts in Berlin to upgrade the housing stock, so that’s a reason for optimism there. If the mill sale goes through and those jobs are stabilized for some period of time at least until the prison kicks in, because the prison will have some positive economic benefit. There’s no doubt, even that’s promising. And if we can stabilize the hospital in Colebrook and keep that strong that will be an economic driver for that area. Particularly for people moving into Pittsburgh, and the far north, retirement homes, things of that nature which does help drive the economy.

Something positive that I think is happening... is that [Berlin] is actually going to do a couple of capital improvement infrastructure projects through a bond issue.

Another person, while identifying specific initiatives as positive, also noted the long-term cycle of change:

Well, I tend to be sort of an optimistic person so I think overall [the branding] is a great idea. Because anything that focuses on this county and brings people here to spend money is good. Or brings people here and makes them aware of Coös County and what the county has to offer for recreational and cultural activities or whatever. I think that’s all really good.... I am optimistic

because I think everything goes in cycles and everything changes, and I think people get really accustomed to the way things are and so anytime there’s a huge change like a mill closure, it’s so drastic that it takes people several years, maybe, to come back and find their footing again. And I’m not sure how that will happen, but I think that it always does happen. It happened in Manchester after the mills closed there. Several waves of mills closing and Manchester seems to be doing better than it has in many, many years. But it took them maybe forty years to get to this point, unfortunately. So, does Coös County have that many years? I don’t know.

A person who moved to the area a few years ago and who is “absolutely optimistic” about Coös’ future detailed a number of initiatives including:

rail, agriculture, smaller businesses, a thriving art community.... They’re building this up here, so there’s going to be more for the kids to do. And I think kids are going to want to stay, people are going to want to stay, people who like it up here are in the 45–75 age range. They’ve done it all, they’ve had it all, and they want to get back to the woods, get back to community. And they still have a lot to give back to the community. So it’s not a selfish type of thing but a rediscovery type of place. And we can market Colebrook as a ‘rediscovery of self’ type of place. I just thought of that, and it’s pretty good. Yeah. And it’s rediscover yourself.

Beyond these specific things, the main reason this person is optimistic is: “Because of the people. Because of the people....They make things happen.” Additionally, among the community leaders surveyed, the specific improvements identified included the Berlin farmers’ market, the reopening of the Gorham mill, the lower school drop-out rate, broadband in some areas, and unity in opposition to Northern Pass.

Some of the people I interviewed intimated that optimism is almost an obligation of community leadership, especially given the challenges facing Coös. One person commented:

There is generally good leadership in the community.... Coös is ripe for the microcosmic change that others envisage for the state and the

country.... Leaders have to promulgate hope... I feel concern that some of our Coös residents have lost hope. They don't feel that their kids will do as well as they have done.

Others elaborated, with one person saying:

Failure is not an option, basically, that's how I look at it.... Change comes slowly.... There's no option for failure, and that's not the mindset of the people, I don't think. It's not a group of people who are designed to fail. I don't think so. It's just going to take a long time. I may not be alive to see it, but I do think we can do it. I think there is a way to move ourselves forward. I don't want to see this area change like, say go 200 miles south, but there are ways we can do it to maintain the quality, the lifestyle, to find what we need first so the kids can come back home, so there's a thriving community. I think it can happen. I really do. We just haven't figured it all out. I think...we need to move forward with quality and accountability. If [for example, the schools] can do that and the kids are coming out with good skills, that's most of it right there.

Another argued:

The glass is half-full. It's not half-empty. You have to be [optimistic]. The more people who see, if I'm going to be an effective community leader, the more people who see me as optimistic, the more they're going to think that maybe something is going to happen, so I have to maintain that.... The thing we need in this country, and probably significantly in this area, is we need to focus on the trades. We need builders, we need welders, we need computer generated operators, we need plumbers, and we need electricians, and the more that we can train these people into the trade industries, a good plumber can make as much money in a year as a good doctor.... [There will be enough work for the good ones.] That's why industry needs to come here. They need to know that those services are available, that those skills are available. That's a good sign. We're training people. Here's what we're training people to do. Here is what you get if you bring your businesses to this area. That's a great attraction.... You build it, and they will come. Even I think if we train a lot and initially a majority of them move away, that as things develop here those who love it here, who are committed to here, will come back. So I think that will happen."

Continuing Challenges

Notwithstanding the optimism evident among Coös leaders, there are, as already highlighted throughout many of the interviewees' comments and survey responses, several continuing challenges in the region. In addition to the press of job creation, economic development, and an improved economic infrastructure, there are gaps in institutional and organizational capacity.

In Coös, as in other rural regions, hospitals have to negotiate among a number of extremely difficult issues: financial costs and payer-mix inequities, the ability to deliver a range of quality medical services, and the ability to attract enough employees to sufficiently staff their medical and managerial functions.

Education is another difficult terrain. In particular, there is the challenge of maintaining high-quality schools that have a solid academic and vocational curriculum that can equip students with the diverse skills necessary for today's rapidly-changing economy. This issue is exacerbated in Coös on account of the gap between geographical scale and population. With many small elementary schools in the county, the question of regionalization and consolidation is on the minds of many people and, in some communities, formal consideration of the costs and benefits of reconfiguration is underway. The financial efficiencies and academic advantages gained by having fewer schools have to be balanced against families' attachment to particular locales and the unique role of the local school in building community attachment and pride. Looking beyond elementary and high school, many leaders and residents alike look to White Mountain Community College (WMCC) to supply the vocational training necessary to securing advantage for the region and its residents. Notwithstanding WMCC's impressive advances in expanding its facilities and providing more training and credentialing programs, it too has to operate in a highly constrained financial and bureaucratic (for example, state accreditation) environment. Moreover, despite WMCC's visionary leadership and institutional nimbleness, there is inevitably a time-lag between identifying training needs and having the resources in place to implement a new program.

Local leaders are well aware of the challenges in the education, health, and child/family services sectors.

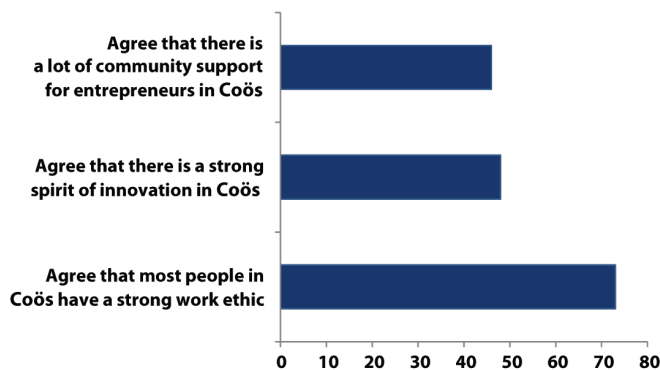
Although the economy is the most acute concern, over a third (38 percent) of community leaders surveyed said that Coös schools are getting worse, 10 percent said they are getting better, and over half (52 percent) said they are much the same as they were two years ago (see Figure 12). Further, in response to the open-ended question asking community leaders to name one specific change they would like to see in Coös, the most frequently mentioned issue, other than economic challenges, pertained to some aspect of school improvement (with 27 percent mentioning it). There is somewhat greater optimism regarding Coös health and child/family services. One quarter say that health (26 percent) and child/family (24 percent) services are getting better, though paralleling their views about Coös schools, over a third say they are getting worse (see Figure 12).

Some community leaders I personally interviewed also mentioned that the state and county tax structures are major impediments to both economic growth and inter-town or regional collaboration in Coös. These structures can be changed. But, if such change is to occur, it will undoubtedly take a lot of political will. The questions at issue are complex, multifaceted, and involve local towns and diverse local government committees (for example, school boards, planning committees, selectmen) as well as, importantly, the re-negotiation of the financial relationship between the County and the State. It is a question on which, first, community consensus has to be formed and, once formed, harnessed to the appropriate institutional mechanisms by which to forge and implement change. Undoubtedly, it will demand a sustained level of trust and cooperation among communities, organizations, and individuals in Coös who may not have worked together in the past.

There are also some critical cultural challenges. The most obvious, as evident from the discussion of inter-town and inter-organization competitiveness in Coös, are the ongoing tasks of maintaining and strengthening the inter-town and inter-organizational cooperation and the regionalized strategic thinking that has already begun. Additionally, Coös leaders also need to encourage and facilitate a culture of innovation. This too is not an easy task. Although there are many successful entrepreneurs in Coös, the development of innovative businesses and industries

and career-tracks is difficult in a region where residents for generations have had an unswerving and taken-for-granted reliance on the mills. In the absence of the mills, not only are new skills necessary, but equally vital are new mindsets. As one interviewee said, the challenge is to start early by “getting kids in high school to see alternatives,” and as phrased by another, to encourage people in general to “think outside the box.” Overall, community leaders have a positive view of the Coös work and entrepreneurial environment. Three-quarters of those surveyed agree with the statement that “Most people in Coös have a strong work ethic” (73 percent), and close to half agree that “There is a strong spirit of innovation in Coös” (48 percent), and that “There is a lot of community support for entrepreneurs in Coös” (46 percent) (see Figure 14).

FIGURE 14. LEADERS’ ASSESSMENT OF THE COÖS WORK AND ENTREPRENEURIAL ENVIRONMENT



Today, many look to Coös’ natural resources as a way to develop innovative bio-mass and alternative energy jobs, and several bio-mass projects are at various stages of implementation. Most notably, despite a prolonged period of controversy, the Laidlaw Bio-Power Plant is moving forward in Berlin, wind turbines are becoming an increasingly common sight in the county (such as at the Mountain View Grand hotel in Whitefield, the Granite Reliable Power wind park in northern Coös), and some local municipalities are also embracing innovative energy practices (for example, the Colebrook landfill and district heating). Part of the challenge in advancing an innovative approach to alternative energy is that there is still a lot unknown about the economic advantages and resource-depletion consequences of alternative energy production options. Insofar as specific, reliable, and non-partisan information can be injected into the public discussion

about alternative energy, the better the chance that communities can give informed assent to new initiatives. This is certainly an issue that will demand much openness and attention from Coös leaders in shaping the region’s short- and long-term future.

Another cultural challenge is the development of a new mindset toward tourism. The promotion of the North Country as a location for grand experiences implicitly calls on all residents in Coös to step up and contribute in whatever way they can to demonstrating that Coös is indeed a special and hospitable place. This does not mean that Coös should become something that it is not; quite the contrary, maintaining the cultural authenticity of place and people is critical to meaningful experiences for residents and tourists alike. Notwithstanding the fact that tourism jobs are less stable and less lucrative than manufacturing jobs, tourism does generate jobs and inject revenue into a community. Further, the job-skill competencies gained in tourism extend to many other professional fields including information and human resource management, accountancy, culinary arts, and personal services. It is important to keep in mind, moreover, especially in light of the increased in-migration that is projected to occur in amenity-rich places over the next few decades, that today’s tourist may subsequently become a homeowner or a new business entrepreneur in a place that was initially for them an attractive tourist destination.

Given that Coös residents are highly attached to and, rightfully, take pride in their local communities they might, perhaps, be persuaded to use that community pride to attract more tourists. Through their everyday attention to high standards of hospitality, quality and service—whether in a grand hotel, a pizza restaurant, or a convenience store—they can make choices that explicitly demonstrate that the values of community trust and neighborliness they hold dear extend to the visitor and the stranger. Similarly, they could join together with their neighbors, as some in Coös already do, to enhance the appearance and tidiness of their towns, yards, and roadsides so that the external face of Coös, and not just its mountains, lakes, rivers and forests, are inviting places that convey the feelings of community pride that so many Coös residents hold. Pride in Coös and in its extensive natural amenities needs to be harnessed to community recognition that tourism can become an important source of revenue for the region, but that to realize and sustain tourism’s potential requires county-wide individual and community investment.

Conclusion

This brief provides a glimpse into the significant role that community leaders play in communities transitioning from economic decline to revitalization. The findings come from a single rural county, and thus caution is warranted against generalization to other rural communities in the United States. Nevertheless, it is likely that if the study were to be replicated in rural communities with similar structural and cultural characteristics, broadly similar findings would emerge.

Coös County has a robust institutional and civic infrastructure, with hospitals, schools, newspapers, and churches complemented by numerous community development, non-profit, and civic organizations. Its residents demonstrate high levels of community attachment, neighborly trust and appreciation, and participation in local organizations. It has a highly dedicated and well-seasoned cadre of energetic leaders who come from diverse sectors—including business, family and health services, economic development, education, the arts, municipal government—and many of whom provide leadership in multiple, cross-cutting arenas. Community leaders feel a strong obligation to make Coös a better place where good jobs and a high quality of life complement each other, and enrich the daily lives of individuals and families while also sustaining the viability of the region and its natural resources. Leaders' commitment to Coös is energized by their own family ties to the area, a deep sense of obligatory citizenship and civic duty, and by a strongly held belief that Coös and its people deserve a positive future.

It is indicative of community residents' commitment to their communities that there are several local organizations and committees in each of the Coös' towns. Leaders have emerged over the years and taken charge of their own community's destiny by joining existing or forming new associations variously focused on community economic development. The existence of these community-based and community-focused groups provides assurance to local residents that there is at least a grassroots effort to keep their community's interests to the forefront, especially when so much of the economic and political decision-making that directly impacts their community occurs in far-away arenas. Ironically, however, some of these groups' leaders are among those in

Coös who believe that the county has too many overlapping organizations. They and their peers express concern that the plethora of local organizations dilutes rather than consolidates the effective use of existing human and economic resources, and hinders the actualization of a shared mission and agenda across organizations both within specific towns as well as between different communities. This concern assumes greater urgency given the global competitive economic pressures toward regionalization. Many community leaders are not only aware of these pressures but speak passionately of the necessity for Coös to embrace regionalization if it is to have a solid chance at growing its economy. Yet, leaders are also acutely aware of the many practical and cultural obstacles that attenuate the fostering of a regionalized identity and inter-community cooperation. Given these challenges, the Coös symposium stands out as an effective way to build connections among individuals, organizations, sectors, and geographical communities across Coös. Other initiatives attest to the willingness of community leaders to embrace regionalization and to do so with demonstrated effectiveness. The collaboration among family service providers through the Coös Family Support Project, the cooperation of the region's five Chambers of Commerce in the Coös branding project, and the establishment of the 45th Parallel EMS, an inter-town emergency medical services unit in the northern part of the county, are exemplary in this regard.

As in many parts of rural America, there is much discussion in Coös about how best to forge a way forward for the region. The tension spans job creation and quality of life concerns and is shadowed by the nagging apprehension that short-term opportunities and gains may mask long-term costs to the community's resources and way of life. The conundrum presented by the challenge of economic transition makes some leaders in Coös open to embracing newly emergent economic opportunities (such as biomass and wind-power) while they and others may simultaneously be skeptical of various other, more traditional and ad hoc sources of revenue generation (including casinos and prisons), notwithstanding the social costs that may accompany them (with gambling, and temporary rather than settled residents). The alleged benefits of all of these proposals, whether innovative or

more traditional, are scrutinized to assess the extent to which they can strategically position Coös for a vibrant future. Their outcomes, however, must remain unknown until a much later date, thus adding further uncertainty to economic development discussions in Coös.

Despite the many factors hindering economic growth as a result of the current national downturn, and exacerbated by economic and cultural conditions specific to Coös, community leaders are, by and large, optimistic about Coös' future. They are readily able to point to the varied resources in Coös and to recent improvements across the county as sources for hope, even as they are also acutely aware of the many obstacles to economic

revitalization. Undoubtedly, some of the challenges confronting Coös, such as the spiraling costs of rural health care, may be beyond community control. But other impediments to a possibly brighter future such as the consolidation of schools, the exploration of alternative energy sources, and an intensified tourist-friendly ethos and its marketing are within the community's control. Leaders, moreover, are already showing signs of taking action to realize these possibilities as indicated, for example, by exploratory formal conversations discussing school mergers and closings, the implementation of hospitality training programs, and the successful pursuit of additional grants to implement new tourist signage in the county.

ENDNOTES

1. My attendance as a participant-observer at the Coös County symposium in 2009 was critical in introducing me to the key issues in Coös and alerting me to some of the key leaders in the region (some of whom were present at the event). I subsequently attended the 2010 and 2011 symposia. During the course of my research, I also spent time in the North Country getting to know the different towns and attending various public events (including rebranding public meetings, arts events, a Berlin City Council meeting, and a regular meeting of the county commissioners). I took detailed notes at these events, and the information I gathered helped to deepen my knowledge and understanding of the region, its issues, and its people.
2. The survey responses were made available to me by Racheal Stuart, Program Director of the Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation.
3. The survey of Coös residents is part of the Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA) Survey administered by the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire. Between 2007 and 2010, the Carsey Institute conducted telephone interviews with almost 19,000 rural residents in geographically and socio-economically diverse rural counties across the nation in an effort to assess the similarities and differences in rural Americans' attitudes toward community change and development. To date, the CERA survey has been administered in thirteen different rural regions encompassing thirty-six counties and twelve states. The CERA survey randomly selects households, and the structured telephone interview is conducted with the adult (age 18 or over) who has had the most recent birthday in the household. Following the probability weighting procedures used in survey analysis, the data are subsequently weighted to adjust for the number and age composition of people living in each household using county-level Census data. There are 756 individuals in the Coös sample of residents surveyed in 2010 (representing a response rate of 31 percent of individuals selected for participation in the survey).
4. I thank Julie Renaud Evans for this information.
5. The unemployment rates are for May 2012. These data are available from the New Hampshire Department of Employment Security, *New Hampshire Economic Trends Dashboard*, www.nh.gov/nhes/elmi, retrieved July 5, 2012. The other economic data are from Anne Shattuck, "Navigating the Teen Years: Promise and Peril for Northern New Hampshire Youth," New England Issue Brief No. 12 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2009).
6. These percentages are derived from the U.S. Census American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2005-2009.
7. The demographic data are from Kenneth Johnson, *The Changing Faces of New Hampshire*, A Carsey Report on New England (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2007); Kenneth Johnson, "New Hampshire Demographic Trends Reflect Impact of the Economic Recession," Fact Sheet, No. 4 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2010); and estimates from the 2010 Census from Kenneth Johnson, personal communication, September 11, 2011.
8. Kenneth Johnson, *Demographic Trends in Rural and Small Town America*, A Carsey Report on Rural America (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2006), p. 15.
9. On the centrality of "leaving home" in America, see Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 56-62.
10. Johnson, *The Changing Faces*, p. 18.
11. BEDCO is no longer in operation. Its loan program is being administered by NCC and NCIC.
12. For research articles on community self-development and inter-community cooperation, see Jessica Crowe, "Community economic development strategies in rural Washington," *Rural Sociology*, 71 (2006): 573-596; J. Sharp et al., "Social Infrastructure and Community Economic Development Strategies," *Journal of Rural Studies*, 18 (2002): 405-417; and J. Flora et al., "Self-development: A viable rural development option?" *Policy Studies Journal*, 20 (1992): 276-288.
13. The first headline is from the *Coös County Democrat* sports section front page on June 1, 2011, and the other two are from its sports section front page on February 5, 2011. I place "big bad" in brackets because these words were not in the headline but in the accompanying story which stated, "The White Mountains boys toughed it out last Wednesday to best big bad Berlin 50-45...and finished first in the Groveton Christmas tournament...."
14. The member organizations are: the Family Resource Center, Gorham; Northern Human Services, Berlin and Colebrook; Family Health Services; North Country Health Consortium; Weeks Medical Center, Lancaster; Indian Stream Health Center, Colebrook; and Child and Family Services of New Hampshire, Berlin.
15. The CFSP has brought several highly regarded early childhood programs to Coös' families, including "Reach out and Read," "Watch Me Grow," "Triple P," "Healthy Families America Home Visiting Program," and "Growing Great Kids." The CFSP website is: www.investincooskids.org.

16. The Mountain View Academy has won several national awards. The towns/communities that are part of the 45th Parallel EMS are Colebrook, Columbia, Dixville, Errol, Pittsburg, and Stewartstown. The purposeful effort to win the cooperation of the Chambers with the Branding Project's "NH Grand" campaign is discussed in Michele Dillon, "Stretching Ties: Social Capital in the Rebranding of Coös County, New Hampshire," New England Issue Brief No. 27 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2011).

17. The "nhgrand" website went live in November 2009. Between November 2009 and September 2010, it received 11,624 site visits, and 50,533 page views. Between September 2010 and September 2011, it received 43,367 site visits, and 140,175 page views; 86 percent of web visitors were new visits. Complementing the website, the BP has also produced visually pleasing and informative tourist brochures on grand lodgings, restaurants, retail stores, and adventures (including hiking, rafting, snowmobiling, dog sledding, and rally-car driving). Its success is enhanced by its use of branding strategies that have worked elsewhere (see, for example, Simon Hudson and Brent Ritchie, "Branding a Memorable Destination Experience: The Case of Brand Canada," *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 11 (2009): 217-228. Notably, locals and tourists are invited to submit photos or videos of their experiences of Coös for possible inclusion on the website, a nod to brand marketers' emphasis on the importance of visual identity and personal testimonies in creating emotional attachments to a destination place. Additionally, the BP sees the value of new interactive social media; the "nhgrand" is on Facebook and Twitter. The BP is supported by grants from many sources including The Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, local businesses, the New Hampshire Department of Resource and Economic Development, the New Hampshire Division of Travel and Tourism, and the United States Department of Agriculture, Rural Development division.

18. Among several other initiatives, The Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation is currently underwriting two big, five-year initiatives: one aimed at enhancing entrepreneurship and business development (which includes the Branding Project), and the other investing in early childhood development. The Fund's commitment to Coös stems from the Tillotson family's long-established family and business ties to the northern part of the county; members of the family continue to live in the community and are part of several local leadership and social networks. The Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation also funded my study of community leadership through the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire.

19. Coös symposium background materials, made available to me by Racheal Stuart, Program Director, The Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation.

20. The speaker was Lewis Feldstein, past-president of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and co-author with Robert Putnam of *Better Together* (2003). Putnam and Feldstein tend to emphasize the bonding and trust aspects of social ties; the theme of their "Better Together" website (www.bettertogether.com) is "Connect with others. Build trust. Get involved."

21. Coos 2010 post-symposium online survey; N =71 respondents; these data were made available to me by Racheal Stuart. The responses in the 2008 and 2009 post-symposium surveys show a similar pattern.

22. See Mario Small, *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.14, 69.

23. See, for example, Gary Green et al., "The Role of Local Development Organizations in Rural America," *Rural Sociology*, 67 (2002): 394-415.

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