

Community Heart & Soul®

Name of Town/City: Mahoosuc Heart & Soul- Bethel, Greenwood, Newry, Woodstock, Mason TWP, Albany TWP

Population: Total of all towns: ~5,000 year-round residents

Challenge: Community engagement and building trust

Focus: Regional vision while maintaining local identity

Key Tool: The Community Network Analysis

Brief Description/Summary of Community: The Mahoosuc Region of Western Maine is known for its rugged beauty and proximity to outdoor recreation. The hardest section of the Appalachian Trail passes through the mountains that give this area its collective name. Each of the communities in this region have a different story and history and they are each proud of their stoic individuality. Engaging residents in a broader conversation about community beyond the confines of town lines was key in getting folks to look beyond their own town and come to the table together.

Mahoosuc Heart & Soul “By the Numbers”:

- 1,500 thin stories were collected by team members
- \$92,000 raised to support the project (\$70,000 grant funding, \$22,000 municipal, and county)
- 800 hours of volunteer time went into Mahoosuc Heart & Soul
- 350 people were interviewed for the project
- 87 Community Action Ideas vetted by the public at keypad polling events
- 9 Community Heart & Soul Statements were developed and signed by the 4 town Boards of Selectmen

Local Condition:

The Western Maine Mountains have been a seasonal vacation spot for generations. However, the development of Sunday River Ski Resort and the closure of local forestry operations and other smaller businesses affected the region, shifting the local economy from manufacturing to service-based jobs.

Many multi-generation residents feel deep connections to this place that no longer holds many of the same characteristics they remember growing up with. Changes in tourism, tax bases, land use and a stalled town comprehensive plan all led locals to look for an alternative way to gauge citizen interest and input for planning purposes.

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Volunteer and Community Response:

Many longtime community members were involved in the outreach and communication of the Mahoosuc Heart & Soul project. They were able to activate community connectors with ties to many of the different groups and populations within the towns. Targeted and intentional invitations were made over the multi-year process to meet people where they gathered and explain the project and the goal. Transparency about process was integral to the success of Mahoosuc Heart & Soul.

Heart & Soul Outcomes:

From hundreds of interviews and thousands of ideas and comments collected during 2016-2018, a team of dedicated volunteers drafted the Mahoosuc Heart & Soul Community Statements. In the spring of 2019, all four town boards signed a letter of support to recognize the findings of the project and use them in municipal planning.

Ideas from the 87 projects for action, collected and vetted by the community during two keypad polling sessions, have been distributed to the vast nonprofit network in the area and many of them are in varying stages of completion.

The Heart & Soul planning effort helped identify larger issues during the process, such as the need for affordable housing and a more sustainable year-round economy. There is funding and energy around addressing these larger ongoing problems in a holistic way that builds upon the work done by Heart & Soul.

In January 2020, all four towns' board members, managers and clerks gathered in one room to discuss the challenges and opportunities of working together. This had never happened before. At the meeting, the boards agreed to discuss cost sharing measures and continue to meet in the future.

