

Community Heart & Soul®

Name of CHS Project/City, State: Re-Imagine Laconia, Laconia, NH

Population: 17,060

Challenge: Updating the City's Municipal Comprehensive Plan

Focus: Comprehensive Land Use Plan and Economic Development

Key Tool: Resident Engagement and Story Gathering

Brief Description/Summary of Community:

Laconia is a small city in central New Hampshire distinguished by the four bodies of water that either border the city or are within city limits: Lake Winnepesaukee, Winnisquam Lake, Paugus Bay, and Opechee Bay. Laconia has three distinct villages as part of the makeup of the city: Downtown, Lakeport and Weir's Beach. This has created a divide for years with residents arguing on how each area should develop, allocate budgets, and plan land use. As a tourist community, there is conflict between the economic benefits of tourism and the strain on local resources.

Laconia "By the Numbers":

- For 9 days each June, over 300,000 motorcycles head to Laconia Bike Week. It is the second biggest bike rally in the nation and the largest on the east coast.
- With over 10,000 decorated jack-o-lanterns, Pumpkin Fest is held every Halloween, bringing the Guinness Book of World Records to Laconia to try and top the previous world record.
- The Laconia World Championship Sled Dog Derby is held every winter.
- 1 Novel – The Jack Reacher Novel, *Past Tense*, was set in and around Laconia.

Local Condition:

As the city of Laconia embarked on a revision of its master plan, officials wanted to ensure that residents had the opportunity to participate. With support from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and in partnership with New Hampshire Listens, a civic engagement initiative of the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire, Laconia deployed Community Heart & Soul focusing on the city's future. Laconia was one of the first Heart & Soul projects, making it a 'pilot' Community Heart & Soul town. The Laconia project also represented a new partnership model with a local community foundation providing major financial support paired with technical and administrative support from Community Heart & Soul and on-the-ground facilitation by NH Listens.

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Volunteer and Community Response:

The Heart & Soul team was made up of residents from all three villages working together to build relationships. The team came up with creative ways of engaging the community such as “conversations in a parking spot” where they transformed a parking place downtown into a living room, complete with chairs, tables, and a rug. Locals were invited to have a seat and tell their story.

A story gathering event took place in the historic Belknap Clock Tower building where over 150 people participated. With the assistance of a group of volunteer trained facilitators from New Hampshire Listens, the crowd was divided into story circles of 10. Each story circle was asked the same questions designed to find out what mattered most to residents. One finding was very evident: participants at every table talked about how much they loved the Colonial Theater and how they wished it could somehow be brought back to its former glory.

Heart & Soul Outcomes:

Following the story circle event and deep expressions of support for the Colonial Theater, a group was formed to write grants, raise money, and work with the city to begin renovations on the building. It is now open and running as both a live theater and movie theater. Mixed use development was also created, including retail and residential opportunities.

Downtown Laconia saw an increase in new businesses, including coffee shops and restaurants. The Heart & Soul Statements became a part of the completed Municipal Comprehensive Plan. The current Comprehensive Plan includes the data from the stories gathered during the Heart & Soul process.

