

## Chapter 8

# COMMUNITY INDICATORS

In implementing a community project ideas or action plans, a critical step is being able to evaluate whether or not a particular project or program is actually achieving its intended goals and creating the desired results. Creating *benchmarks* can be an effective method of determining success. In general, community leaders, planning facilitators and all the sectors and groups active in carrying out a specific project or program must pay close attention to the various indicators that can show whether or not a initiative is succeeding, whether it should be continued, altered or ended, and how this might be undertaken. Community planning and development is a fluid and dynamic process, and community leaders and project participations should constantly pay close attention to the signs indicating success or failure.

Community indicators can also play a larger role, showing whether or not community planning or development efforts have resulted in the broader structural adjustments sought in the community vision, whether financial, economic, or social. For example, a specific project indicator could show the success of a commercial development by its high occupancy and lease rates, while a broader community indicator could show that community policing efforts have been successful due to a reduced crime rate. This chapter will thus discuss the important types, attributes and uses of community indicators.

## Topics

A Basic Measurement Vocabulary  
Five Outcomes Indicating Community Success  
Eight Outcomes Indicating Community Capacity-Building  
Commonalities of Successful Communities  
Is Your Town Farm Friendly?  
Conclusion

## A Basic Measurement Vocabulary

To begin our discussion of community indicators, three important terms should be defined. Those are the following:

**Goal:** The purpose toward which effort is directed (e.g., better health, lower crime rates).

**Indicator:** An actual activity or condition you can monitor or measure in some way, to assess whether or not progress is being made toward a goal (e.g., blood pressure or weight, number of arrests).

**Measure:** The actual counting, analysis or units required to measure an indicator. In the examples above, it could be number of pounds over or under average weight, or number of crimes.

## **Five Outcomes Indicating Community Success**

Listed and explained below are five major outcomes that can generally be considered indicative of “success” in community planning or development efforts.

- #1) *Increased use of the skills, knowledge, and ability of local people.*
- #2) *Strengthened relationships, partnerships, and communication.*
- #3) *Increased community initiative, responsibility, and adaptability.*
- #4) *Sustainable, healthy ecosystems providing multiple community benefits.*
- #5) *Appropriately diverse and healthy regional and local economies.*

## **Eight Outcomes Indicating Community Capacity-Building**

A main goal of community planning and development, as previously discussed, is to build social capital and community-capacity so that community residents and citizens will be able to more actively conduct similar initiatives in response to future issues or problems. Listed and explained below are eight general indicators that the process of building community capacity is proving successful.

- #1) *Expansion of diverse, inclusive citizen participation.*
- #2) *Expanding leadership base.*
- #3) *Strengthened individual skills.*
- #4) *Widely-shared communal understanding and vision.*
- #5) *Common strategic community agenda.*
- #6) *Consistent, concrete, tangible progress towards community goals.*
- #7) *More effective community organizations and institutions.*
- #8) *Better resource-utilization by the community.*

## **Commonalities of Successful Communities**

Although every community is a unique situation and therefore requires individual and place-based solutions and initiatives to solve community problems, there are some characteristics and traits successful communities have found they share. Understanding these “commonalities of successful communities” can help community leaders and planning facilitators in try and recreate those characteristics in their own communities. To this end, this section lists eleven common traits of successful communities and some characteristics of these traits.

### **1. Well Articulated Visions**

- Start with the end in mind.
- Build on dreams and vision.
- Accommodate human nature.
- Use of imagination and creativity.

### **2. Looking for Opportunities**

- Believe in possibility of creating own future.
- Wants to become a leader or exemplary in whatever initiatives are used.

### **3. Risk-Taking**

- Be innovative – tries new things.
- Be comfortable with ambiguities, uncertainties and the vagueness.
- Be experimental and avant-garde.

### **4. Holistic Perspective**

- Balanced perspective (consider all relevant aspects).
- Global perspective (understand community’s role in larger world).
- Community-wide view (address all aspects of the community).

### **5. A Belief In “Doing”**

- Work to actively create the future.
- Maintain and practice a strong work ethic.
- Do it now, not later.
- Energizing the process using synergies.
- People can actually do things – not just meet and talk.
- Focus on purpose and goals – not organization or structure.
- Action leads to data – not vice versa.

### **6. Find ways for Everyone to Participate**

- Enlist others to actively participate.
- Foster collaboration and beneficial partnerships.
- Empower interactive citizens and citizen-based processes.
- Provide a sense of ownership, pride, and accomplishment.

### **7. Develop PEOPLE First**

- Strengthen other individuals and groups.
- Recognize individual accomplishments.
- Celebrate communal accomplishments.
- Create useful educational opportunities.
- Grow and cultivate needed skills and knowledge from within.
- View people as producers, not consumers.
- Build upon the growth and development of people.

#### **8. Build Upon Community Resources**

- Keep capital / resources within the community.
- Become a leader in whatever the community chooses to pursue.
- Build upon the unique strengths and capacities of place.
- Build upon and support the commonalities of residents.

#### **9. Nothing Succeeds Like Success**

- Become process-oriented.
- Set an example through active accomplishment.
- Plan small wins, then execute them.
- Celebrate accomplishments, both individual and communal.
- Become a leader in what you do, motivate others to do the same.
- Accomplish community goals “inch by inch and row by row.”

#### **10. Make Good Use of Knowledge**

- Follow an empirical perspective – follow statistical trends or qualitative patterns.
- Seek information from multiple and diverse sources.
- Action leads to data, not vice versa; thus try to act first, not collect data forever.

#### **11. Engender an Atmosphere of Trust**

- Have a willingness to trust and believe in each other.
- Believe in the “best” motivations and intentions of fellow community members.
- Let everyone “do their part” by getting them to actively contribute.

Again, not every one of these common principles for success can or will be found in every community or situation. But the idea is to be aware of several major traits that have proven indicators of success for many other communities, and to see whether such characteristics could help achieve success in your particular community. The chances are that if activities and actions are taken according to or following most or all of these principles, a better social, economic and cultural atmosphere will arise which will make community planning and development meetings and initiatives meet with more success in achieving the goals and vision of the community.

### **Is Your Town Farm Friendly?**

A critical test for rural, semi-rural or even suburban communities in beginning to develop a vision for the future is whether or not their towns are “farm friendly.” Preserving, sustaining and cultivating agriculture-based or farming-based businesses can play a key role in creating sustainable, place-based, vigorous local economies and communities. For example, local farms can produce food that can be sold in local market at a cheaper price, since transport and middlemen have been cut out. Agricultural or farming concerns should thus not be automatically relegated to second priority behind encouraging more traditional economic or industrial development. To determine whether or not their towns are “farm-friendly,” the follow checklist/quiz is provided for community leaders and planning facilitators to work with.

## **A Checklist for Sustaining Rural Character**

**Take the Test!** Does your town?...:

- ***...have a detailed section on agriculture in the Town Master Plan?*** The Master Plan is the big picture of what land uses are encouraged, protected, or excluded within a town. Does your town’s Master Plan refer to ‘maintaining rural character,’ but overlook agriculture as the primary component? Agriculture should be a primary issue, not an afterthought!

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...allow agricultural uses in more than one zoning district?*** Agricultural businesses are not the same as other commercial development. Some towns confine agricultural businesses to the commercial zone only, while other towns prohibit such uses in commercial zones. Farm enterprises are often hybrids of several different uses; ordinances and regulations should thus allow farm businesses flexibility.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...allow simpler design standards for Site Plan Review regulations on agricultural businesses limited to seasonal use?*** Simpler standards for certain aspects of Site Plan Review regulations make sense for agricultural uses, such as parking requirements for seasonal retailing or events. When agricultural uses are limited in scope and impact, they need not be treated as if they were year-round permanent developments. Does your town apply the same site design requirements to a seasonal farm stand as to a grocery store?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...allow flexibility in regulations to accommodate the unusual needs of agricultural businesses?*** Both the land use impact and the off-site impact of a seasonal farm business is much less than that of a full-time business. Pick-your-own strawberries or Christmas tree farm businesses can’t be viable in a town that treats farms like all other retailers. Do your town’s regulations provide for reduced restrictions such as expanded hours of business operation, temporary signs, parking near pick-your-own fields, or on street parking?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...require buffer zones between farmland and residential uses?*** The old saying “good fences make good neighbors” has a modern corollary that says “good buffer zones make new neighbors good neighbors.” New development should not place the burden on existing farms to give up boundary land as a buffer zone between agricultural and residential uses. New residential development should provide for its own buffer zone and/or landscape plantings for screening when necessary.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...provide for the agricultural use of open space lands created by innovative residential subdivisions?*** Many towns have adopted innovative subdivision regulations like cluster housing, which provide for setting aside open space land within the subdivision. Ideally, such land should be the most valuable agricultural land, be big enough for commercial agricultural purposes, and specifically allow long-term agricultural use to provide consistent resource management. Smaller plots of set-aside land could accommodate community gardens. Land set aside for open space can stay productive agricultural land and at the same time contribute to the ecological health and scenic quality of the area -- instead of becoming grown over with brush.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...have a consistent policy approach for local land use procedures that deal with agriculture?*** Planning Boards, Zoning Boards, and Conservation Commissions have different responsibilities, but a common regulatory outlook is possible. Update your Master Plan to express the value agriculture contributes to your town's quality of life through open space, wildlife habitat, watershed purification and natural resource preservation. Establish a policy presumption that agriculture is of beneficial use in your town, and fairness and consistency will follow.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...have a good idea of how much agriculture exists in town?*** Consider having a town-appointed committee formulate an Agricultural Profile to demonstrate the economic, cultural, and resource - stewardship value of agriculture in your Town. People often carry the misconception that "there's no agriculture in our town" if they don't cows and red barns. Agriculture in New Hampshire stretches from apples and bees to yaks and zinnias!

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...allow roadside stands or pick-your-own operations by right?*** Consider amending your Town's zoning ordinance so that certain agricultural operations don't need a Special Exception or Variance. Write flexibility into ordinances or regulations that may apply to agricultural uses with an intent to clearly promote such use, not to deny them because the rules don't fit the unique situations that frequently arise with agricultural businesses.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...use zoning definitions such as "agricultural access uses" in a broad and inclusive manner?*** "Agricultural access uses" refers to everything from machinery sheds to housing for seasonal workers. Various agricultural businesses have very different needs that can test the balance of rules and exceptions. Writing flexibility into the ordinances and regulations can prevent many denials of agricultural access where "rules don't fit".

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...allow farm stands to sell produce purchased elsewhere?*** Many towns have rules that a certain percentage of farm stand produce be grown in town. The unintended consequence of such regulation is to penalize local farm operators who experience a crop failure! The rational basis for allowing a farm stand shouldn't only be how much is grown on the farm, but what benefit the farm provides to the town from the open space, wildlife habitation, watershed purification and natural resource preservation it carries out as well.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...properly assess specialized agricultural structures?*** Specialized structures such as silos, milking parlors, and permanent greenhouses depreciate in value over time. Providing assessors with depreciation schedules may enable more accurate valuations, which can lead to lower assessments. If your town frequently overvalues agricultural structures, this can have a chilling effect on all types of agricultural or farm investment.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...allow non-traditional or retail-based farm businesses in an agricultural zoning district?*** Agricultural businesses don't all look alike. Trying to decide what constitutes an agricultural business can involve splitting hairs to make unfamiliar distinctions between what is "commercial" and what is "agricultural". Ordinances defining agriculture based on state law may be accurate, yet need local interpretation. Your town should recognize that newer types of farm businesses such as horse arenas, landscape nurseries, or greenhouses are more intensive in land use, but still carry valuable elements of rural character that benefit the town.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...address agricultural structures in building and safety codes?*** Building practices that are state of the art for a specialized use in agriculture may not fit the specific codes meant for housing or commercial structures. Bringing up to code agricultural buildings that are historic structures may destroy the very qualities that make them special.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...consider farmland a natural resource and encourage conservation easements, discretionary easements, and purchase of farmland?*** Easements and outright purchases of farmland ensure preservation of the natural resource base for agriculture. Once a town has applied these techniques, the benefits of keeping farmland in private ownership can be more clearly appreciated. By understanding and allowing for the peculiarities of agricultural land use, towns can encourage working farms that contribute to the town's well-being at no cost to the taxpayers.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...have any visible demonstration of the value of agriculture?*** Does your town have a county fair, an apple festival, or an Old Home Day parade? Making agriculture visible to the general public helps establish the economic, cultural, and resource stewardship value of having working, active farms in town.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...respect the state Right to Farm law, which has specific exemptions for odor and noise?*** Local control is an important tradition for New Hampshire towns. The state Right to Farm law provides a support for farmers if local officials overreach their regulatory authority. Conflicts between agriculture and other land uses can be reduced when town officials are informed about Best Management Practices (or B.M.P.s) that may alleviate nuisance or noise complaints. The University of New Hampshire's Cooperative Extension Service writes B.M.P.s about various agricultural practices based on scientific or technical research.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

- ***...encourage farmers to use Soil Productivity Index (S.P.I.) calculations to reduce Current Use tax burdens?*** Using information from the Soil Productivity Index (S.P.I.) may reduce the Current Use assessment on less productive agricultural land. By reducing the tax burden on agricultural land, towns can encourage the maintenance of open space at a relatively low cost.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

**•...have farmers serving on local land use Planning and Zoning Boards, Conservation and Heritage Commissions?** There are few better ways to incorporate agricultural concerns into local land use ordinances or regulations than having farmers serve in positions of authority. In such positions farmers can help your town land use boards keep a broad perspective by asking “Have you thought of the consequences of...?”

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

**•...have farmers serving on the local Economic Development Committee?** Agricultural businesses are frequently undervalued in terms of their effect in a community. Most of the economic activity generated by farms stays within its community. Negative impressions about the strength of New Hampshire agriculture may have a similar impact on the availability of credit to viable farm operations. Having successful farmers on Economic Development Committees thus serve to change these misconceptions.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

**•...know where to go to get advice and assistance on farm questions?** Make the connection to resources such as the Department of Agriculture, Markets and Food, U.N.H. Cooperative Extension, New Hampshire Farm Bureau, and Natural Resource Conservation Service to enable farmers and agricultural business to strengthen their operations through utilization of a broad base of technical knowledge and expertise.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

### **How to Score Your Results . . .**

- Yes 20 – 21:** Your town is exceptionally friendly and helpful to its farmers.
- Yes 16 – 19:** Your town knows that farmers are good neighbors who add lots of values to the quality of life, but you’re not sure what to do to encourage them.
- Yes 12 – 15:** Careful! Your town may be less farm-friendly than you think . . . even inadvertently unfriendly.
- Yes 8 – 11:** Time to get to work helping your fellow citizens understand the importance of protecting their agricultural base.
- Yes 4 – 7:** Yours is not a farm friendly town, but there might still be hope. Seek help immediately from farmers, farm groups and related organizations!
- Yes 0 – 3:** Ask yourself what you like about your town, and then what it would be like without any agriculture whatsoever. If there are any farmers left in town, take them out to dinner and ask them to help you turn over a new leaf.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the nature, type, and uses of community indicators in allowing community leaders, residents and planning facilitators to measure and judge whether or not initiated projects and action plans are proving effective in helping to meet community goals and realize the community vision. It concluded with a quiz to test a series of indicators about a community element that is often overlooked: agriculture and related businesses. The next, and last, chapter provides a listing of further resources and institutions that can provide help, advice, or assistance concerning any of the ideas, concepts, or issues mentioned and discussed in this guidebook.