

**“Meeting the Needs of an Aging Population and Attracting Young People”**

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**Purpose:** This was the sixth and final focus group session held as a means of developing priority strategies for the NHCOG’s Regional Plan of Conservation and Development.

**Attendees:** There were about 24 attendees representing various P&Z Commissions, including 4 from Cornwall: Karen Nelson, James LaPorta, Ben Gray and myself. Unlike the other focus group sessions, there were no experts or special speakers.

**Update on Data Gathering:** (all data is available at [www.northwesthillscog.org](http://www.northwesthillscog.org))

- I. **Resident Surveys:** 1381 residents responded to the survey, including 47 from Cornwall. Top 3 priorities were:
  1. Attract and retain young people (42%)
  2. Watershed protection (41%)
  3. Farmland protection (35%)
- II. **P&Z Commission Surveys:** 230 respondents, top 3 priorities were:
  1. Protect farmland (88%)
  2. Enhance/attract small businesses (86%)
  3. Foster town collaboration (85%)
- III. **Survey of 585 Torrington High School Students**
  1. Only 13% plan to stay in NW CT, 40% are not sure and 47% plan on leaving.
  2. What would keep them in NW CT would include interesting jobs, more night life, the ability to live in a “town center” environment and affordable housing. Examples of “night life” included bowling and roller skating (!)
- IV. **Survey of People at a Senior Center:** priorities include:
  1. Improved walkability
  2. Access to jobs
  3. Community exercise options
  4. Intergenerational exercise programs
  5. Vetted list of tradesmen, repairmen and contractors.
  6. Increased home health services
  7. Access to locally grown food

**The usual dismal statistics on our ageing population were also presented.**

**What Are the Towns Doing and What Should We Be Doing?**

There were far fewer ideas/strategies for attracting and retaining young people than for meeting the needs of the ageing population. Some recurring themes included:

1. NW CT is at a disadvantage compared with the rest of the state due to inapplicability of various state guidelines such as the State Housing Plan, due to our small populations and geographic configuration. On the other hand, we are also unique in having more regional collaboration than most other COGs and we should definitely build on this. “Holes in one town could be filled by a neighboring town”. Torrington, for example, has received a Working Cities Challenge grant to collaborate with 16 local communities to create economic growth, focusing on attracting and retaining young people. The collaborative nature of the proposal was what convinced the grantor to choose them.
2. The problem of public transportation was often named by the various towns.
3. “If you focus on the millennials (ages 17-34), the services you develop will help the seniors too”.
4. We need to find a way to make weekenders turn their city homes into their weekend homes and stay in NW CT full-time.

#### **What Cornwall Had to Offer:**

1. Ben Gray emphasized the need for towns to use 21<sup>st</sup> century technology to communicate with all its citizens. Young people, in particular, expect communication to be electronic and at a standard that is easy to navigate.
2. The Cornwall EDC’s focus on promoting it’s school and opportunities for tourism and outdoor recreation was shared as a model for other towns.

#### **Specific Ideas Cornwall Might Want to Get Involved With:**

1. Communication is a problem, for example, the NW Chamber of Commerce has 600 open job listings. We need to communicate with young people by means of the same technology they are already using.
2. Consider creating a Regional Housing Trust to fund improvements in housing. Some individual towns already have their own, but not all.
3. We should get more young people involved in town government to help cement their connection with the town.
4. Have your Land Trust buy up farmland for open space protection but lease parts of it back to small farmers.
5. Change regs pertaining to home-based businesses to allow up to 3 FT employees.
6. Change accessory apartment regs to allow two accessory apartments per lot, eg. one inside the home and one in an accessory structure.
7. Reduce lot size requirements and house size requirements.
8. Create more zoning for mixed use.
9. The Park & Recreation Director might function as a Seniors Recreation Director too: The goal is to increase activities that are both oriented towards families as well as seniors (family bingo was an example).