



## Every Acre Counts: the Newfound Watershed Master Plan

### The Voices of the Community in the Watershed Master Plan

By Brian Eisenhauer, Ph.D.

What do you want the future to look like? The question is not only about our personal decisions, as the places we live provide important context to our lives. Our individual and community well-being are strongly connected to environmental health, economic conditions, and many other factors. Creating a vision for the future and a plan to achieve it is a complex task. While experts often assist with these tasks, to plan effectively, the opinions and desires of residents must be understood to create a vision and identify the clear actions needed to achieve a desired future. This article is the third in a series about *Every Acre Counts: The Newfound Watershed Master Plan*, and describes the social research conducted by the Center for the Environment at Plymouth State University to gather public input for the Plan. *Every Acre Counts* is an environmental planning project funded by the NH Department of Environmental Services and coordinated by the Newfound Lake Region Association.

As discussed in previous articles in this series, there are several reasons a watershed plan is very valuable to residents of the Newfound watershed. The watershed includes the communities of Alexandria, Bridgewater, Bristol, Groton, and Hebron, as well as parts of Danbury, Orange, Plymouth, and Dorchester. Watershed geography transcends municipal boundaries, and while each town chooses its own policies, coordinating planning is essential for environmental health and a vibrant economy. *Every Acre Counts* will provide the watershed communities with tools to achieve a vision for the future that balances growth and conservation.

But what do people of the Newfound watershed want that future to look like? The *Every Acre Counts* project provides people with many ways to voice their opinions, including scheduled meetings in each community, visits to planning boards, collections of oral histories from long-term residents, and importantly, a scientifically conducted, random sample community survey. To obtain public input for the Plan that accurately represents the breadth of views among watershed residents, a two stage survey project is being conducted by the Center for the Environment at Plymouth State University and the *Every Acre Counts* project team.

Elected officials, planning commissions, and other civic groups have long used community surveys to better understand the preferences of local residents. Community surveys can ask respondents how they feel about existing services and conditions, and can also be used to determine citizen attitudes and opinions towards community planning issues. In the *Every Acre Counts* survey identifying residents' desires for the future, understanding concerns about management alternatives, and documenting current attitudes towards specific issues were essential goals.

The first survey was administered to randomly selected property owners in the summer of 2007. The research team worked with town halls to develop the sample, and ultimately, a total of 1,938 questionnaires were mailed to valid addresses with 41% (794) people responding! These results are encouraging, as most community surveys have response rates that are far lower. Extensive analysis of the survey data was conducted using statistical techniques, and several general results of particular importance are summarized below.

First, residents perceive rapid changes in the watershed, and consider maintaining natural beauty, ensuring a continued rural way of life, adding more local businesses, and protecting environmental quality as their top planning priorities. To achieve these goals, both planning and personal actions are needed. Fortunately, many residents are strongly attached to the region – it is more than just where they live, it is a place they care about. These connections can be a powerful motivator for environmentally responsible behaviors to protect water quality and other resources important for economic well-being. While these lofty aspirations exist, some respondents express concern about the possibility of increased regulations and the costs of complying with

them. Community members want to be confident that the final Plan clearly demonstrates the connections between goals and desired outcomes, and that recommended actions lead to personal and community benefits desired by residents.

The results presented above are broad summaries, and we encourage you to learn more about the 2007 community survey by examining the recommendations and full Survey Report at:

<http://www.newfoundlake.org/watershedmasterplan/themasterplan.html>. A second, shorter community survey highlighting special topics of concern that have emerged throughout the watershed planning process will be administered during the summer of 2009, so keep an eye out for another opportunity to share your views and ideas.

As a whole it is clear that there is a strong desire among residents to ensure the beauty and vitality of the region into the future, and to have communities work together to protect the watershed. We hope that you continue to watch for these articles to learn more about the Watershed Master Plan, and also hope to hear from you at public meetings or around town to express your desires for the future. You can also share your ideas with the NLRA at [info@Newfoundlake.org](mailto:info@Newfoundlake.org).

Author and affiliation: Dr. Brian Eisenhauer, Ph.D. is Associate Director of the Center for the Environment and a member of the Social Science Department at Plymouth State University. [bweisenhauer@plymouth.edu](mailto:bweisenhauer@plymouth.edu)