

# **Attracting New Residents: A Strategy for the Adirondack Park and its Communities**

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Northern Forest Center

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

The resource economy that once fueled prosperity in the Adirondack Park has changed significantly over the past 30 years. While the forest is still an essential economic driver in the Adirondacks, thousands of jobs that supported prosperous communities have left the region – and with them, young people seeking opportunity. Today there are simply not enough young people to sustain Adirondack communities, threatening the long-term viability of our towns and villages.

Our contemporary context adds opportunity but also calls for important work. The coronavirus pandemic makes remote work from a rural area a real option for many, but also has increased demand for our limited housing stock. Meanwhile, our national conversation around racial equity highlights the immediate relevance of diversity, equity and inclusion for communities that may have previously perceived such issues as remote.

This strategy is a guide for community leaders, nonprofits, and public entities interested in creating the conditions that may help attract a new generation of residents to the Adirondacks and bring back young people who have left. Hundreds of voices have contributed to this document through individual interviews, online surveys, focus groups, and the annual Common Ground Alliance forum.

### **DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES**

The demographic challenges facing the Adirondacks and other rural parts of the country – specifically, increase in median age, overall population decline, and low numbers of working-age individuals – are well-recognized. Unless we intentionally focus on a strategy that targets younger people, continued negative impacts will become irreversible. To sustain year-round businesses, community services, and strong local schools, we must arrest overall community population decline.

### **COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES**

For many, the Adirondack Park can be a unique, desirable home with attractive benefits that aligns with their values and offers meaningful career opportunities. Communities looking to attract these people – and prepared to implement a comprehensive approach to doing so – will find valuable processes and tools in this strategy that position them for success.

Attracting new residents is a long-term effort requiring significant and sustained leadership and resources as well as alignment and support between the region's nonprofit and public sectors. To successfully implement this strategy, communities must be self-reflective, motivated and open to change.

We identify ten conditions that communities can immediately begin to address to create the conditions needed to attract a younger generation:

- Jobs *and* careers
- Other young people
- Activities and places that build relationships
- Positive digital presence
- A welcoming atmosphere that conveys safety and acceptance
- Quality housing
- Authenticity and walkability
- Recreational trails and other assets reachable from town/hamlet centers
- Reliable and affordable high-speed internet and cell coverage
- Demonstrated progress

The strategy goes into detail about what each of these conditions means and entails. It includes a self-assessment that communities can use to evaluate their status and progress. It also lays out a detailed process for community self-evaluation, strategy development, implementation, and iteration. In summary:

#### *Preparation*

1. Collect and review existing survey and planning work already conducted in the community.
2. Identify and engage external resources to support community process.
3. Complete the Community Assessment.

#### *Assessment and Planning*

4. Convene stakeholders for community conversations.
5. Identify assumptions and principles to guide the community strategy.
6. Assess community strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities.
7. Explore the community's positioning - how it differentiates and promotes itself.
8. Identify near/long term priorities and activities.
9. Create an active, regularly updated community workplan.

#### *Action*

10. Implement the specific activities outlined in the workplan.
11. Communicate outcomes and celebrate all kinds of success.
12. Revisit strategy and plan to identify ongoing gaps and means to address them.
13. Keep going – back to #10.

While these items are community-specific, implementing the strategy also requires learning, cooperation, and advocacy from diverse stakeholders at all levels of influence across the Adirondack Park.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

Delivering the full strategy will require sustained and dedicated capacity in four specific areas:

1. Share successes with communities to demonstrate opportunities to attract new residents, and provide them with tactics and tools to replicate locally.
2. Facilitate sector-specific affinity groups to advance relationships and accelerate best practices.
3. Work closely with select communities to implement elements of the strategy, adding capacity and resources.
4. Advocate for public policies and resources that support community development initiatives.

The Attracting New Residents strategy has the potential to revive Adirondack communities with people who deeply value the quality of life, connection to community and nature, and outdoor recreation opportunities that current Adirondack residents treasure. Successfully implementing this strategy may serve as a national model for reversing rural demographic trends and providing exciting new opportunities for young people seeking a different way of life.