

Community Conversation & Project Pitch Night Report

On Monday March 20th a second community event was held in the Unity College Center for the Performing Arts as part of the ongoing Making Headway: Unity as a Destination Program. This event began with a welcome provided by Joe Saltalamanchia, a member of the Unity Economic Development Committee. Joe touched on the process and outcomes of the first gathering and introduced the six project ideas around which small groups had organized. In the four weeks between events, these project teams met and developed their ideas into project pitches to be presented to their neighbors on March 20th.

About 40 community members attended the Project Pitch night including a handful who had not attended the first event. The same reporter who covered the first event for CentralMaine.com was in attendance at the second gathering and did an excellent job of covering the spirit and energy of the projects & teams.

Article can be found here: <http://www.centralmaine.com/2017/03/21/unity-group-envisions-five-projects-to-help-make-town-a-destination/>

After the welcome Tyler Kidder of GrowSmart Maine framed up the main event: project presentations from the small groups. Each group would have eight minutes to present and a few questions or comments would be taken from the audience after each presentation. After all the presentations were finished, attendees would use sticky dots to show their support for one or more of the presentations given that night. The process of dot voting allowed everyone to lend their voice to move Unity toward becoming a destination by prioritizing the projects, evaluating which would be most exciting and impactful, and demonstrating which have broad community support.



The first group to present was the project focused on establishing and expanding a consistent brand for the town of Unity. Good work had already been done on this front including a logo. The group suggested a new Unity website with a modern look and lots of functionality and interconnection between other online entities. They also suggested a part-

time staffer to keep the website up to date and act as a point person for expanding the brand.



The second group presented their idea for a combined Visitor Center and Maker Space. This idea grew out of the original project idea for an artisan retreat. When the small group met, they realized that a visitor center and maker space was more in line with the needs of the community and the interests of the members in the group. The multifunctional hub would provide much needed access to information about the area in one place, along with opportunities for artisan studios, adult and children education around craft and art, and a retail space for local artisans to

sell their creations.

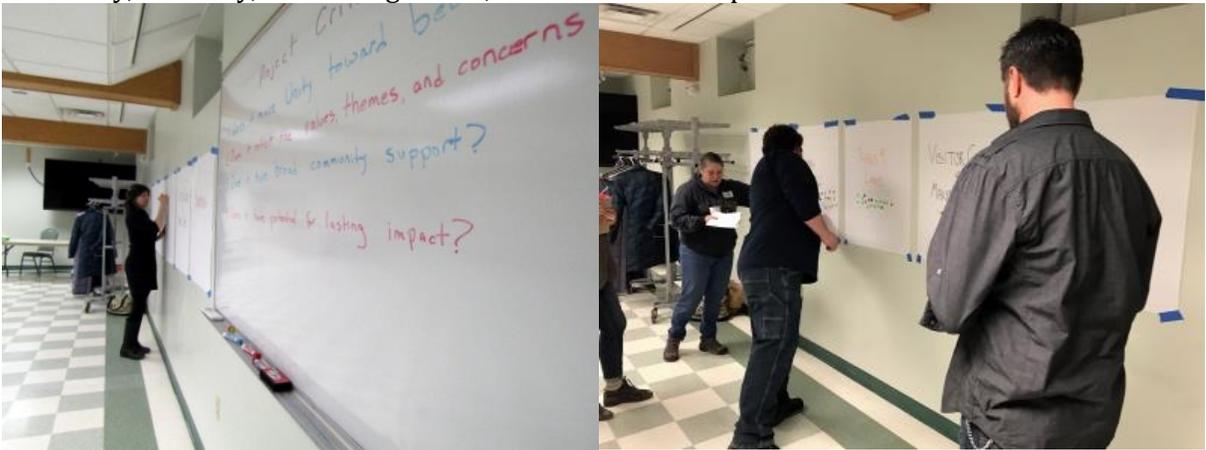
Two groups combined for the third presentation: Trails & Lake as a Destination. Unity has a beautiful lake and trails of many varieties looping through it. What Unity lacks, however, is easy and attractive lake access for boats or those on foot as well as a full trail map that includes all trails, interconnections between trail systems, and trails identified by user type. This group performed a light-hearted skit in which they demonstrated the Before ('we're lost!', 'Wish I could go for a paddle on the lake, but I can't find it and there are no rental boats!') to After, where visitors and residents alike have easy, clear access to trails and the lake.



The fourth presentation was for a brew pub. This idea had a lot of traction at the first gathering, and, as it turns out, is already into the development phase with members of the EDC involved in finding real estate and options for locations. This group was not asking for votes as they felt they were already moving forward and wished to reserve the available resources for the other groups.



Last but certainly not least was the presentation given on lodging. Specifically, the lodging group focused on the Doctor's Inn, a proposed reuse of an historic property in Unity that has a motivated seller. With beautiful décor and a notable restaurant featuring local food, this development would fill a void for upscale, place-based lodging in the village of Unity. It would also provide local jobs, offer a market for local food producers, and potentially house a brewery, distillery, botanical gardens, and artisan retail space.



The four projects looking to advance into the next stage of proposal development and funding opportunities were posted on the walls. Each attendee was given four dots to vote as they pleased. They could give a vote to each project, or multiple votes on projects.



The Doctor's Inn had the most support with 49 dot votes. Branding came in next with 29 votes, the visitor center & makers space received 25 dots, and the trails & lake project came in close behind with 21 votes. All attendees gathered around the flipchart pages on the walls to discuss what to do next. Move just one project forward? Move multiple projects forward?

During the discussion a few important points were raised. Many of the projects were connected and could build on each other's successes or resources. To this point, a few of them required part-time staffing which could be shared. Some projects, like the branding effort, are already underway and could be completed more quickly than a project that required extensive investment and infrastructure, like lodging. Additionally, the branding project could be a good foundation from which the other projects would benefit. The Unity Business Exchange has been tirelessly working to advance some of these projects and continues to be a collaborator with the small groups and the EDC as the process moves forward. People expressed both a recognized need for elder housing and a need to appeal to and think about families and young people.



In the end it was decided that all four projects would move into the next phase where they will refine their proposals and apply to various funding sources. The EDC wants to hear more about all of the projects and help the groups understand the process between idea and reality. There was also a helpful explanation of TIF Funds, Tax Increment Financing. This is an economic development tool available to municipal governments that allows the municipality to invest designated tax revenue into worthy projects. Unity receives \$60,000-70,000 a year in TIF to use. The EDC advises the Unity Select Board on how to use this money, which could be available to advance some of these projects.

The next step in the process is for the four project groups to present their proposals to the EDC for review. Next, they will present projects to the Select Board for a simple vetting process before they move on to implementation that includes seeking funding for feasibility studies, expert help, or other immediate next steps on their proposals.

GrowSmart Maine will work with the EDC to develop a Phase 2 proposal for Making Unity a Destination, to include a work plan and budget.