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'Granite State Future' has hopeful impact

By CHUCK BINGAMAN Eagle Correspondent



Southwest Regional Planning Commission Senior Planner Tara Germond shows idea boxes that are being used through Southwest New Hampshire and the Upper Valley to solicit citizen suggestions for planning the state's successful future. CHUCK BINGAMAN PHOTO

Regional Planning Commissions for the Upper Valley and for Southwest New Hampshire are deeply into planning the futures of residents in Claremont, Charlestown, and points north, east and south.

Deemed The Granite State Future (GSF) project, the nine regional planning commissions in the state, including those headquartered in Claremont and Keene, are gathering information — and citizen input — to map our futures and planning choices for decades ahead.

The result of the 3-year project begun last year will be regional comprehensive plans based on local values and needs that, together, will be visions for how citizens and their leaders can improve life in their regions, their communities and the state as a whole. The plans will address such issues as land use, transportation, economic development, housing, public health, energy, and cultural, historic and natural resources.

Citizen input

Seeking and using citizen input is a key component in initial phases of the project. Both the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee and the Southwest New Hampshire Regional Planning Commissions are seeking input in a variety of ways among which are the following. In conversations last week with Southwest Senior Planner Tara Germond and Upper Valley Executive Director Christine Walker, they listed these outreach efforts to collect citizen ideas.

The Southwest Region has launched a series of "neighborhood conversations" with groups in the region to discuss what they think is important to the vitality of their areas. The first was in North Walpole last week. Commission staff will be holding these conversations throughout the region in March and April. To learn more about upcoming events visit their website at www.swrpc.org/regionalplan.

On April 2, there will be a NH Listens session at the Keene Public Library. This event will be a facilitated conversation on the question "How can we make our region the best place to live, learn, work and recreate for everyone?" This event is an opportunity for neighbors to talk with neighbors about local concerns, needs and ideas about the future. To register, visit <http://nhlistens.org/event/granite-statefuture>.

The Upper Valley Commission last week launched a similar series called "New Hampshire Listens." It attracted a diverse audience of 70 at the Common Man restaurant in Claremont. More such conversations will follow.

The Upper Valley Region will, next week, mail 11,000 inquiries to area households asking for citizen input on planning topics they are interested in.

On its website, the Upper Valley commission invites citizens to note particularly valued sites and resources on an electronic map and to mark them for others to react to. See <http://regionalplan.uvlsrpc.org/regional> forum/. A similar map for the Southwest Regional Commission website will be "live" soon.

The Southwest Region is launching a high school art competition to engage students in expressing what they think makes their region special and unique. The Upper Valley region has launched a student video contest asking students to show aspects of their region that they particularly value. See <http://regionalplan.uvlsrpc.org/events/student> video-contest/.

Both the Southwest region and the Upper Valley region have placed "idea boxes" at dozens of sites around the two regions for citizens to leave comments and suggestions on planning subjects to be considered in preparing the new plans. So far that approach has yielded a small number of responses.

The bottom line

What will result from all this talk and research? According to the commissions, it will include...

- A new, common understanding of what is important and valued within each region and the state as a whole.
- An updated strategy outlining projects that, when implemented, will create successful and vibrant communities.
- Efficient use of limited resources through targeted investments in assets and infrastructure that the people have said are important to the people within the region.
- Greater understanding of the capacities and assets of the regions' resources including: housing, transportation, water and sewer infrastructure, natural resources, economic opportunities, energy, and telecommunications.

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