Rivers & Economic Development

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River Towns

Rivers can play an important role in a community’s economy. Your river can serve as a place to fish, paddle, enjoy a lunchtime walk, observe wildlife, and relax with friends and family. A vibrant river town has public spaces where people can safely enjoy a view of the river, as well as good water quality and public launch sites for paddle sports and fishing. Communities and visitors value walkable, attractive river towns with a diverse downtown business community where they can enjoy an evening meal, and access basic amenities.

Many New England towns were built with their backs to their rivers as the river was used for mill power and waste removal. Today with improved water quality, many towns have the opportunity to re-embrace their rivers for recreation, scenic, and other quality of life amenities that contribute to a thriving downtown economy.

River Towns, defined as communities working to embrace their downtown river for sources of economic vibrancy, provide opportunities for nature based economic development. This information brief describes some of the characteristics to keep in mind as communities move from a Mill Town to a River Town. We also highlight five case studies from across New Hampshire where communities are taking different approaches to utilizing their downtown rivers for economic development.

What Contributes to Vibrancy

The following characteristic are based on what makes a river town vibrant for a resident, visitor or business owner. These characteristics are based on the built and natural environment and are adapted from the assessment criteria used by the Pennsylvania River Towns Program, multiple states’ First Impressions program, and are informed by the National Civic League’s Civic Index. These characteristics work together to create a vibrant river town. A canoe-kayak launch only adds vibrancy when paired with riverside parking, appropriate signage, and a safe pathway to the launch. Communities can use the characteristics for assessment, asset mapping and marketing.

Many downtowns throughout the state have rivers running through them.
# Characteristics of River Towns

**Boat Launch:**
A place to put in your kayak, canoe, ADA compliant.

**Business:**
Especially businesses relevant to water sports – casual restaurants, coffee shop, drugstore, outdoor outfitter, grocery store, local shops.

**Lighting:**
Availability and quality of lighting on streets, in parking lots, in parking garages.

**Park:**
Parks, parklets, pocket parks, waterfront or amphitheater.

**Parking:**
Public, street, lots, or private garages within walking distance to the river

**River Walk:**
Path around the river through the town.

**Sightlines to River:**
Manage vegetation, or remove invasive species.

**Water Quality:**
Safe for recreational activities.

**Community Art:**
Murals, artwork, musicians, concerts, street performers.

**Displays & Signage:**
Pedestrian signs, wayfinding signs, parking signs, business signs, municipal signs.

**Downtown Entrance:**
Where people enter the downtown. Is it clear where the entrance is? Is the entrance attractive and welcoming?

**Landscaping:**
Flowers, trees, green spaces, community gardens.

**Other:**
Other characteristics you wish to capture but do not fit into any of the existing categories.

**Overnight Accommodations:**
Hotels, motels, campgrounds.

**Pathway:**
Path leading people from the river to the downtown area.

**Point of Interest:**
Historical homes & buildings, architecture, fountains, memorials, statues, museums, plaques.

**Public Facility:**
School, library, town/city hall, post office.

**Seating:**
Benches, stoops, chairs, lawns, place people gather that are not considered a park, outdoor seating, outdoor dining, benches.

**Sidewalks & Crosswalks:**
Pedestrian safety, sidewalks, crosswalks, quality, connectivity, usability for a range of abilities.

**Streets & Transportation:**
Streets, bicycle lanes, bicycle racks, shared bicycles, buses, cars, taxis, ridesharing, street parking, parking by boat launch, public and private lots, traffic lights.

**Waste & Recycling:**
Availability and quality of waste and recycling receptacles.

**Water Fountains & Restrooms:**
Availability of water fountains and public restrooms near trail and around the downtown area.

(Blue box = Critical to assess)
The following characteristics are critical to a vibrant river town:

River Related Businesses:
A diverse business community attracts residents, employees, and visitors to the downtown area. Paddlers and fishers enjoying a day on the river will look for basic amenities, including casual restaurants with evening hours, a coffee shop, drugstore, and gas station. Residents or visitors looking to rent or purchase sporting equipment or take a lesson will look for sporting stores and outdoor outfitters with a focus on paddle sports and fishing.

Clear Sightlines to the River:
A vibrant river town must maintain clear sightlines to the river. This may require communities to manage native vegetation and remove invasive species that block the river from view.

Lighting:
Lighting along pathways, river walks, streets, and parking lots can activate spaces at night, creating a positive perception of safety that’s essential to continually attracting community members and visitors to these public spaces. Lighting is especially important for paddlers returning to launch sites after dusk.

Parking:
River towns should have adequate parking downtown, at parks and river walks, which may include street, public and private lots and garages. Affordable, all-day parking should be available near public boat launch sites, with enough space and sufficient lighting for parking and maneuvering boat trailers.

Public Boat Launch or Dock:
If flow rates and water quality indicators support paddling or boating on the river, docks and public launch sites for canoes, kayaks, and motorboats are important for attracting community members and visitors to the river’s edge. Affordable, all-day parking near the launch site is essential for parking and maneuvering boat trailers. Ideally these launch sites are connected to downtown areas with a well-marked, low-grade pathway that draws paddlers into the downtown area to visit restaurants and shops after a day on the river.

River Walk or Riverside Park:
Public spaces in the riparian zone (river banks) provide seating and gathering space for the community to enjoy the river. River walks provide a space where community members can walk, run, or portage their canoe or kayak to a launch site. Larger parks with amphitheaters or pavilions may serve as a location for concerts, farmers markets, river festivals, regattas, and other community activities.

Water Quality:
Water quality is central to the vibrancy of a river town. While pristine waters are not necessary, it is important that riverways are safe for secondary contact recreation activities like paddling, fishing, and riverside walks.
Wilton is a small bedroom community located in Hillsborough County. Today Wilton has a rich manufacturing history that dates back to the 1770’s. Main Street is lined with several historic buildings, an independent movie theater, cafes, and small shops. Wilton has struggled with low consumer traffic and persistent vacancies in their downtown business district since the 1970’s, when their mills began to close, in-town employment opportunities shrunk, and major commercial shopping centers opened in Milford and Nashua.

In response to community interest in revitalizing their downtown, the Wilton Economic Development Leadership Team was launched in July 2016. During an inventory of Wilton’s assets, the leadership team’s focus was quickly drawn to the Souhegan and Stoneybrook, which converge in downtown Wilton. Seeing their river system as a potential resource for economic development, the Leadership Team secured $42,000 in municipal funds to install a short section of Riverwalk beginning at the Wilton Fire Station and ending where the Souhegan River intersects Main Street. Funds were used for lampposts, underground conduit, invasive removal, landscaping, and walkway materials.

The Riverwalk was unveiled in October 2017 with a public celebration that attracted more than 200 community members. In hopes of extending the Riverwalk, the Leadership Team secured an additional $7,000 in municipal funding to hold a design charrette with Plan NH (Town of Wilton, 2017a) which generated a series of recommendations for an extension of the Riverwalk down Main Street Wilton, including a pedestrian bridge. These recommendations were drafted in collaboration with more than 100 community members in a process that fostered community buy-in. (Nashua Regional Planning Commission, 2018) (Town of Wilton, 2017b)

**Challenges**

Wilton is built with its back to the Souhegan. Installing an extension to the original river walk along the banks of the Souhegan would require the municipality to secure easements from multiple private property owners. While most commercial property owners were supportive of the project, residential property owners were reluctant to give up direct access to the river. Grant funding is needed for additional plans.

**Successes**

The initial Design Charette held with Plan NH generated community interest and engagement in the river walk project and the Leadership Development Team’s downtown vibrancy work overall. Initial grant funding allowed the project to begin.

**Long-Term Goals**

Community members have expressed interest in a dinner restaurant, covered pavilion for community gatherings, a place to safely fish, and bike paths/lanes.
Dover pursues a riverfront project that would use public property and Tax Increment Financing Districts for residential and mixed-use developments along the Cocheco River, complete with a river walk and park that will connect the City’s greenspaces.

Dover began exploring the redevelopment of their waterfront in the late 1960’s with a tract of public property bordering the Cocheco River. The city hoped to revitalize their downtown by developing a residential community and public park on the blighted property, which then housed a water treatment facility, waste site, and public works buildings. After more than thirty years of planning, community engagement, and public discourse, Dover’s waterfront development project began to gain traction in 2005, when the City hosted an intensive design charrette with Plan NH to generate a formal riverfront development plan.

The City was engaged in preliminary discussions with a private developer when the 2008 recession hit, slowing progress on the project. The project was relaunched in 2012, when the City relocated the sewage treatment plant, public works buildings, and waste site. Today Dover is moving forward with a phased plan for two mixed-use developments that will include 475 multi-family residential units and hotel rooms, 25,000 square feet of commercial space, riverfront park, river walk, canoe-kayak launch, public dock, and community grandstand. The riverfront park will connect 1,200 ft of existing river walk infrastructure, Henry Law Park, and McLariss State Park, creating a riverside “green belt” where community members can walk, picnic, attend a concert, or enjoy the river by boat.

The plan will be executed in partnership with Cathartes, a private developer who has agreed to purchase the property for $3.37 million. The development will be composed of two parcels covered under separate tax increment financing (TIF) districts projected to generate $6.6 million to complete public improvements (bluff excavation, site grading, shoreline stabilization, waterfront park, streets, and public utilities). As a midterm goal for the waterfront park, the City installed a public dock for various paddle sports, which was opened to the public on June 1st, 2018.

Challenges

Dover’s riverfront development plan has been informed by global climate change, and the City’s history of severe weather and flooding. As sea levels rise, Dover has experienced increasing seasonal flooding, causing damage to buildings, infrastructure, and public parks in the riparian zone. The City’s exposure to flood events is expected to increase, with water levels predicted to rise by 2-6ft along the Cocheco.

Successes

The City installed a public dock for various paddle sports, which was opened to the public on June 1st, 2018.

Long-Term Goals

To address flood risks in the proposed development, Dover plans to elevate the property using crushed rock from an abutting quarry. Because of the project’s proximity to the Cocheco River, Dover will need to receive approval from the Army Corps of Engineers to elevate the landscape over both parcels.
Nashua

Nashua pursues a largescale waterfront development plan designed to revitalize their downtown business district and connect community members to greenspace throughout the City.

On October 10th, 2017 Nashua’s Board of Aldermen unanimously approved their Downtown Riverfront Master Plan. The master plan was developed in response to community interest in leveraging the City’s waterways for economic and community development. The master plan is designed to increase connectivity between existing trails and parks with a city-wide river walk, further environmental stewardship along the City’s riverways, expand public access to the river, create opportunities for recreation and access to green space, improve flood resiliency, and develop the City’s economy through capital improvements. (City of Nashua & Halvorson Design, 2017)

Clearing sightlines to the river has been a top priority. This means removing a continuous hedge of invasive species and deciduous trees that completely obstruct sightlines to the Nashua River by mid-summer. The tree removal and herbicidal treatments required to clear sightlines to the river come at a cost, exposing the river’s ecosystem to potentially damaging chemical compounds, and eliminating the ecosystem services provided by trees in the riparian zone (shade, erosion control, reducing pollution in surface water runoff, reducing sedimentary pollution, etc.).

The proposed river walk will connect residents to more than 300 acres of public parkland in a continuous route that is currently blocked off by railroad tracks and roads. Steep grades along the Nashua River provide little existing space for a river walk, and industrial contaminants lining the river floor prohibit pedestrian bridges that would require excavation. Nashua plans to address this issue with a system of cantilever bridges, which attach directly to riverside buildings using a complex system of scaffolding. A short section of cantilever bridge has been installed off Main Street. Unique to Nashua is a focus on using the river for business attraction and retention—the riverwalk is seen as an employee benefit.

Challenges

Flood risk has presented a significant challenge for Nashua as they pursue workforce and mixed-income housing developments on their riverfront. When the Cotton Mill Apartments opened in 2012, the housing project was located in the 100-year floodplain, a threat to the viability of the project. To address the flood risk and remove the housing development from the floodplain, the City installed a series of automated crest gates along a municipally owned hydro-electric dam to control the flow of water downstream. At a time when many cities are decommissioning their dams, this decision presents a difficult tradeoff between the economic viability of riverfront development projects and the health of the river as a wildlife habitat.

Successes

In 2006 and 2007, Nashua installed a segment of river walk along cantilever bridges leading to their downtown area. The river walk was installed in partnership with a private developer who shared the cost of the project. Community members can enjoy views of the river as they walk, run, or dine at one of the restaurants lining the riverwalk.

Long-Term Goal

Install a pavilion or stage where the City could host outdoor concerts, plays, or festivals.
Berlin

In an effort strengthen tourism, generate investment in the community, and attract potential employers to their community, Berlin draws attention to the Androscoggin River through festivals and a proposed river walk project designed to effect long-term change in their local economy.

Berlin launched its Riverfire Festival in October 2003, led by City Manager Patrick MacQueen. Inspired by the Waterfire Festival in Providence, RI, Riverfire celebrates the Androscoggin River with a street fair, road race, and family activities that lead up to the lighting of a series of fires along the river. Now hosted by the Androscoggin Valley Chamber of Commerce and sponsored by Service Credit Union, the festival attracts community members and thousands of visitors from across the state who come to celebrate the river and explore Berlin. Riverfire is complemented by Paddlemania, a summer paddle sports festival that begins in neighboring Milan and ends in Berlin’s Heritage Park. Both festivals have helped tie Berlin’s identity directly to their river, bringing greater vibrancy to their downtown, and strengthening their pull as a local destination.

Berlin’s City Council hopes to build on the success of the Riverfire Festival with a mile-long river walk that will connect Service Credit Union Heritage Park with their downtown area. By pursuing the river walk project, the Council hopes to draw community members downtown, create a space to meet and recreate, and improve the first impression visitors have when they spend time in Berlin.

The Riverfire Festival and Riverwalk project reflect a broader community interest in leveraging the Androscoggin River as an attractive natural feature, not solely a natural resource. In some ways, this interest falls in conflict with the river’s role as an important power source. The Androscoggin river loses 200 ft of elevation as it passes through Berlin, making it an ideal location for both whitewater recreation and hydroelectric power generation. Berlin is home to four privately-owned hydroelectric dams that produce more than 30 megawatts of electricity, 25 of which are exported to southern markets. This highlights the tradeoff communities face as they consider how best to leverage their river resources.

Challenges

There has been considerable interest in housing for dedicated community members 55 or older, but Berlin is limited in its ability to expand residential housing opportunities along the river.

Berlin is home to the Chlor-Alkali superfund site, located just upstream from the City’s downtown area. A remnant of Berlin’s industrial past, the site earned its designation due to severe mercury contamination linked to industrial byproducts of one of the Berlin mills. Mercury levels in the river prevent fishing for consumption. (US Environmental Protection Agency, n.d.)

Successes

In an effort to revitalize their downtown and bring greater vibrancy to the community as a whole, Berlin’s City Council committed taxpayer funds to support the restoration of Route 16, which runs through Berlin’s downtown area and along the Androscoggin River. By issuing a bond for the project, the Council avoided the limitations of grant funding and sped up the timeline on the project. This project was a tremendous success and will complement the river walk project, which will run parallel to Route 16.

Long-Term Goal

Berlin plans to extend the river walk to create a continuous loop along both sides of the river using an existing bridge. This plan will require Berlin to secure permission from private landowners.
References and Resources


City of Berlin Master Plan. 2010


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Strengthening Economy Through Nature

UNH Extension’s Community & Economic Development Team aims to help communities connect natural assets with community goals to create vibrant economies and high quality of life for all. This can be in the form of assisting communities in identifying and utilizing their natural capital, such as connecting their downtowns with trails and leveraging green infrastructure to reduce or maintain costs of community services.

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