



## **Summary Report**

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### **Public Engagement for Granite State Future**

#### ***Submitted to:***

The Nashua Regional Planning Commission

for

New Hampshire's Regional Planning Commissions

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*Note that the appendixes referenced in this document are available online at <http://nhlistens.org> and [www.granitestatefuture.org](http://www.granitestatefuture.org).*

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This executive summary provides an overview of the process and results of an extended public engagement process conducted by New Hampshire Listens of the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire and the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, on behalf of the nine Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) in New Hampshire. The work was carried out under contract with the Nashua RPC, using Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant funds administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The primary purpose of the public engagement process was to elicit a wide range of views from diverse residents of New Hampshire, representing all geographic regions of the state, to the question:

*How can we make our community the best place to live, learn, work, and play?*

The purpose of the effort was to understand the preferences, values, concerns, and aspirations of residents for their respective local communities, regions, and the state as a whole and to share this information with the nine RPCs. Each RPC will use the findings of the two-phase public engagement process we employed to develop regional plans responsive to regional preferences and needs. In addition, an overall “statewide snapshot” will be created to support cross-regional collaborations and shared initiatives, although a single statewide plan will not be created given the variability of conditions and resources found in each of the nine regions.

It is important to note that this work by the Regional Planning Commissions was based on the New Hampshire Livability Principles, a set of concepts that was developed by the NH Transportation and Land Use Roundtables, which were sponsored by the NH Charitable Foundation. The conversations described below referenced the six NH Livability Principles, but they explored many topics beyond those principles as well. That is, the public engagement process of Granite State Future began with, but was not bound by, those principles.

This executive summary offers a brief review of the primary findings that were generated in the public engagement process. Detailed reports of the findings of the complete process may be found at [www.GraniteStateFuture.org](http://www.GraniteStateFuture.org) or [www.nhlistens.org](http://www.nhlistens.org).

## Public Engagement Process

NH Listens and UNH Cooperative Extension—in consultation with RPC directors and program managers—designed a two-phase approach to elicit broad participation. First, we used a “**community of interest**” model to identify specific self-identified groups in New Hampshire who would have views reflecting their particular circumstances. Examples of such groups included youth, those with disabilities, senior citizens, low-income residents, veterans, immigrants, and other minority populations. A total of 20 focus groups were conducted with 120 participants during the winter of 2012 and spring of 2013. The focus groups were facilitated by UNH Cooperative Extension staff and were conducted at locations across the state.

The second phase of the process was based on a “**community of place**” model, in which extended deliberations were conducted in 10 different geographic locations representing all

areas of the state.<sup>1</sup> These events were widely advertised and open to all members of the public. Each discussion lasted three hours and was organized around small groups of 8 to 12 participants working with a trained facilitator. A total of 528 participants in 45 small groups from 115 towns attended the community of place conversations, representing a wide range of ages, occupations, length of residency in the community, political affiliations, and education levels. The representative sample of New Hampshire residents was not scientifically constructed, but there was sufficient diversity to give confidence that the results of the conversations reflect the wide range of priorities and concerns found in the general population. The combined results of the two approaches—communities of interest and communities of place—provide a robust picture of what is most important to New Hampshire residents.

## **Summary of Findings**

These two approaches, involving over 600 residents in 65 separate discussions lasting over 1,500 hours in total, yielded a rich set of findings. Each small discussion group recorded its answers to questions posed in the discussion guide, including areas of both agreement and disagreement, on newsprint as well as on summary sheets completed by a volunteer in each group. UNH Cooperative Extension and NH Listens staff used inductive analytic methods to identify the most frequently occurring statements and themes within each individual group, each regional event, and across all events. The overall findings across all regions are summarized below. Regional differences are discussed in detail in the full report on Communities of Place.

### ***Communities of Interest***

Twenty-seven different themes were generated by the community of interest focus groups. The top three are described in detail here, but all can be found in the full report. Many of these themes are connected or inter-related. The most frequently discussed topics included:

***Transportation***—All focus groups identified transportation as one of the most problematic challenges they face. The most commonly expressed concerns regarding transportation highlighted the lack of public transportation and limitations to the existing public transportation system. “There is not enough public transportation” was commonly stated, both in terms of the locations served and the frequency of the service. Use of private cars was discussed, with an emphasis on their high cost and the necessary reliance on cars to obtain food and health care and to get to jobs. The lack of public transportation to major cities, employment centers, and the northern part of the state was noted by most groups. Concerns for pedestrian safety and walking access to schools, churches, shops, and other amenities were also mentioned often.

***Housing***—Housing was a topic discussed by all focus groups except for groups of youth. Most of the discussion evolved around the need for more affordable housing in safe areas near public transportation. Focus group participants identified the need for a variety of affordable housing types to accommodate the needs of families and people with disabilities.

***Jobs and Employment***—Participants connected concerns about transportation and housing to the availability of reliable, decent paying jobs. Well-paying jobs are in short supply, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Berlin, Claremont, Dover, Keene, Kingston, Laconia, Manchester, Nashua, Pembroke, Plymouth

general lack of attractive jobs threatens the ability to attract and keep younger residents in New Hampshire. The need for access to job training to remain current and competitive was identified by most of the Communities of Interest. Greater availability of part-time jobs is offset by the lack of benefits associated with part-time employment. People with low incomes, people with disabilities, and those who are homeless have particular difficulties in finding steady employment. As with housing, lack of public transportation and the expense of private cars were seen as barriers to obtaining employment.

Other topics of concern to many of the community of interest focus groups included access to social services, recreational opportunities for youth, and the quality of K-12 schools (especially with respect to their ability to serve the populations represented by the Communities of Interest).

### **Communities of Place**

Though a range of topics were discussed at each regional event, certain topics were of particular interest to participants across the state. The most frequently discussed issues included:

***Employment and Educational Opportunity***—All groups in all of the regions discussed aspects of unemployment, job growth, and economic development. Some participants felt that there is a lack of jobs overall, while others felt there is a lack of jobs that are an appropriate fit with the available skill levels in the state. Many groups commented on a scarcity of adequate training for job requirements in the state. Several communities commented that there needs to be more effective job training available—both for college educated and non-college educated individuals. Quality K-12 education and affordable higher education were frequent topics that participants connected to employment opportunities.

***Youth***—All groups in all of the regional locations discussed issues related to youth. The majority of groups expressed concern about youth migration out of New Hampshire and discussed ways that their communities can retain and attract young people. Some groups felt that the cost of higher education deters young people from remaining in the state. Others felt that there is a lack of job opportunities for youth and recent college graduates. Some participants thought that the lack of affordable housing drives young people out of the state. Although there was no agreed-upon cause for youth migration from New Hampshire, there was some agreement among regions that communities and towns, as well as the state overall, should contemplate effective ways to encourage young people to work, go to school, and live in our state.

***Older Adults/Senior Citizens***—All small groups discussed changes and challenges that growing elder populations in the state will pose on their individual communities. Participants explored questions about the care of seniors overall and how seniors will access and afford health care and other services. Many groups expressed concerns about how older adults who no longer drive will access transportation, yet maintain independence. There was also discussion about the relationships between seniors and taxes; some groups felt that, as the population ages, tax revenue bases and the growth of the economy might slow. The need for planning in local communities was evident to participants—including the need for young people to be trained in the multiple health care careers relevant to senior citizens. Some participants felt that no government resources should be used to support seniors, as families, churches, and neighbors should serve in this role.

**Transportation**—All groups discussed some aspect of transportation in relation to their regions. The majority of groups were concerned about accessible and affordable transportation, and many mentioned the impact of long commute times on lifestyle. In particular, a need was identified to ensure that certain populations have access to transportation, including youth and seniors, as well as disabled and low-income individuals. Beyond access, groups talked about the need for more transportation offerings and a greater variety of them, as well as the health and lifestyle improvements that can come with being able to bike or walk to work or to town centers. Safety when biking and walking is an issue in some communities, especially where sidewalks are minimal. Many participants mentioned that young people are attracted to cities and towns where they have access to public transportation. Some groups discussed a need for more effective transportation among New Hampshire’s cities, such as Concord, Nashua, and Manchester, valuing opportunities for communities to be connected for economic and social reasons.

**Housing**—All groups commented on the need for improved housing offerings in their communities, including more affordable, appealing, and available housing options. Many groups expressed concern that housing in their communities is too expensive. Many groups made direct connections between transportation and housing. Housing is often located far from jobs and town centers so that—without public transit—it is challenging for individuals without vehicles to work or access essential services. Although there was concern among some participants about government subsidized housing and transportation, more people were concerned about barriers to home ownership and having a variety of housing and transportation options for a mix of income levels.

**Taxes and State and Municipal Funding**—There were general concerns about taxes and state funding in all of the small groups. Many groups commented that taxes are too high. Others felt they were too high and too singularly drawn from property taxes. Some noted that New Hampshire is known for its “tax advantages” and did not see taxes as too high per se, although many participants commented that the state is overly reliant on property taxes. There was a concern that high property taxes make homeownership difficult or even prohibitive. Some groups thought taxes aren’t funding the right services. There were also concerns about a lack of state funding for particular services and programs, including schools and health care. Many groups commented on how tax incentives for small businesses might attract more economic development to the state.

**Zoning and Development**—Most of the regions spent time discussing zoning and development. Many groups expressed a desire to balance economic development with the preservation of natural resources and the local character of their communities. This message was consistent across regions and included a stated value in planning and zoning for future development.

**Environment and Natural Resources**—It should be noted that across all groups and all regions, participants spent some time expressing their appreciation for the natural beauty of New Hampshire. This appreciation, as well as concern, for the natural environment also was mentioned often in the Communities of Interest. Most of the regional groups were concerned about the future of the environment and natural resources in the state. Discussion of the environment ranged from pollution to water, climate change, energy, natural resources, and agriculture. Discussions about water included concerns for water quality, water shortages, storm water runoff, and pollution. Participants also talked about the importance of supporting local

agriculture and maintaining the “rural character” of New Hampshire. Many groups discussed issues related to land use, and often participants spoke of both the barriers caused by regulations and conservation as well as a balanced need for both. Property rights were discussed frequently when issues of land use and natural resources were raised, particularly as related to water. For some participants, there was a desire to ensure that a tradition of individual rights and a libertarian culture continue to inform decisions. For others, balancing community and individual concerns were complicated, requiring ongoing and persistent efforts.

**Infrastructure Needs**—Many groups commented on a need for more effective and updated infrastructure within their communities, though regions viewed infrastructure differently. Some communities saw infrastructure as the upkeep of roads, bridges, and town buildings. Participants in more northern regions expressed difficulties with communication infrastructure, particularly reliable internet access. There was a general recognition that technology infrastructure can change how we work and where we live. A number of regions mentioned creative and entrepreneurial opportunities linked to better broadband access across the state.

The above summary of findings from the community of interest and community of place conversations demonstrates that the overriding concerns of New Hampshire residents who participated are focused on transportation, housing, employment, and the well-being of youth as well as senior citizens. In addition, the quality and affordability of education (especially tied to job training), the level and use of taxes, and preservation of natural beauty were common themes.

The findings in this summary provide useful information not only for RPCs, but also for decision makers and community leaders in general. The public engagement effort described here represents an innovative and effective approach to involving residents in defining and solving problems in their communities. Engagement through face-to-face deliberation complements and strengthens governance processes that typically rely primarily on the voting booth. This kind of personal, “hands-on” approach is consistent with New Hampshire’s traditions of local control and direct democracy.

## Final Report: Outreach through Communities of Interest

The University of New Hampshire UNH Cooperative Extension held twenty focus groups with “underrepresented populations” as part of the community engagement framework for the Granite State Future project. These are populations who share a common bond or interest and may not have traditionally participated in community planning—especially at the regional level—and may not have shared a common geography. UNH Cooperative Extension staff has a history of working with many of these underrepresented populations which include low income, minority, immigrant, senior, and youth populations, along with veterans and young adults. Nine UNH Cooperative Extension staff worked throughout the state to meet with these populations to ask about their experiences where they live, work, play, and learn.

**Methodology:** UNH Cooperative Extension staff used focus group interviews as the assessment tool to gather ideas, thoughts, and opinions from small, targeted groups. Focus groups allowed for considering a wide range of topics as defined by the Granite State Future project. As anticipated, there is limited detail in the responses due to the wide range of topics and the limits of time with focus groups. Focus group participants reported on their individual experiences and did not represent whole communities. The focus groups were held around the state from December 2012 to April 2013. A total of 120 people participated in the focus groups.

Communities of Interest groups for the Granite State Future outreach effort were identified as populations representing:

- Physically disabled
- Low income and below the poverty line
- Racial and ethnic minorities
- Senior citizens
- Youth
- Homeless
- Immigrants and refugees
- Veterans

### Communities of Interest

*A community of people who share a common interest, goal, or knowledge about something—a common bond or interest. A community of interest is defined not by space or geographically, but by some common bond or interest.*

In order to select the targeted Communities of Interest, UNH Cooperative Extension identified over fifty organizations that represent Communities of Interest across the state of New Hampshire. The Granite State Future Equity and Engagement Technical Advisory Sub-committee recommended contact organizations, and the Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) provided suggestions for Communities of Interest in their respective planning area.

The discussion questions for the focus groups were formulated using the overarching question: “How can we make our community the best place to live, learn, work, and play?” The questions were drawn from the NH livability principles, including topic areas such as traditional settlement patterns, housing, and transportation choices; natural resources; community and economic vitality; and climate change and energy efficiency. Focus group questions were developed with input from the Granite State Future Equity and Engagement Technical Advisory Sub-committee and the RPC Granite State Future project managers. The following list represents the main questions for the focus group sessions:

### **Thinking about where you live, work, and play in New Hampshire ....**

1. Tell us about the neighborhood/community you live in. What do you like about it? What would you change? What would you like to stay the same? Does it feel safe?
2. Is there a place for you and your neighbors and friends to gather? Do you get together or spend time together?
3. How do you get around your neighborhood/community? Drive, walk, bike, bus?
4. Do you know people who do not drive? How do they get around?
5. Tell me how your kids get to school. Do they walk, get a ride, or take the bus?
6. Do your kids have a safe place to play outside? Are they interested in playing outside? Do you have a park nearby?
7. Does your housing meet you and your family's needs? If not, tell me about this. How long have you lived here? Do you plan to stay here? Is there anything preventing you from staying where you live?
8. Do you have job opportunities here? Can you easily get to your job? How do you get to your job? Does transportation have an impact on your job—time, cost, ease?
9. Do you have a convenient place to buy groceries? Do you have a place to get fresh fruit and vegetables? Do you go to a farmers' market or farm stand? Do you want more choices for where you buy affordable food?
10. Do you have a place to walk in the woods or swim in a lake, pond, or river?
11. Do you have medical services in your community? Can you get to the medical services you need?
12. Would you like to see more businesses in your community? Can you give examples?
13. Is recycling important to you? Do you recycle?
14. How do you heat your home? Is your home warm enough in the winter? How are your energy and heating costs? Do you have options or wish you had other options? If so, what would they be?
15. Are there buildings or areas in your community that are an eyesore or unsafe?
16. What are the most important areas where we should be investing our limited public dollars?
17. What are your priorities—schools, roads, environment, water/sewer, public safety, etc.?
18. Do you belong to any community organizations or committees, such as the school PTA, a library group, Lions, etc.? Are you an elected or appointed official, or do you volunteer for a town committee?
19. Are there other things about your community you would like to share?

## **Major Themes by Communities of Interest**

### **Senior Citizens**

The top issues of importance to **senior citizens** who participated in focus groups:

- Transportation to access basic services and medical needs
- The condition and maintenance of roads
- Pedestrian access in local communities
- The high cost and lack of support for higher education
- Access to needed social services

### **Low-Income Populations**

The top issues of importance to **low-income populations** who participated in focus groups:

- The lack of public transportation options, especially in the evening and on weekends, and the affordability of transportation options; lack of transportation is a barrier to employment
- Lack of affordable housing
- Concern about public safety and drugs in their communities
- The lack of youth recreation and general youth programs
- Concern about the quality of K-12 education and their local schools

### **Minority, Immigrant, and Refugee Populations**

The top issues of importance to **minority, immigrant, and refugee populations** who participated in focus groups:

- The lack of public transportation options
- The need for job training to gain employment
- The language barrier as it affects many areas of life, including employment, communication with schools, and navigating public transportation

### **People with Disabilities**

The top issues of importance to **disabled populations** who participated in focus groups:

- The lack of public transportation options and housing along transportation routes
- The lack of job opportunities and employment linked to transportation and housing
- Pedestrian access in local communities not designed to accommodate people with disabilities
- Lack of housing choices accommodating the needs of people with disabilities

### **Youth**

The top issues of importance to **youth populations** who participated in focus groups:

- The lack of transportation for employment and socializing
- Support for and investment in their schools
- Lack of job opportunities
- Lack of recreation opportunities, especially for teenagers
- The cost of higher education

Community of Interest focus groups were arranged through organizations that work directly with the target group. The twenty organizations were selected in order to cover each Community of Interest identified with a secondary consideration of having them be geographically representative based on their clientele and service area.

Most participants talked about liking the community where they live. The strong sense of community, knowing neighbors, and community members helping each other was often stated. Youth indicated that they knew their neighbors, church members, and teachers. Participants often cited specific things they loved, such as a church or access to shopping or school, and they said their community has a great deal to offer.

## **Major Themes**

### ***Transportation***

Transportation in the state was raised as an issue by each of the Communities of Interest and was the most common topic talked about in all focus groups. The most common discussion of transportation highlighted the lack of public transportation and the limitations of the existing public transportation system. “There is not enough public transportation” was commonly stated—both in terms of the locations served and the frequency of the service.

There is a strong need for expanded public transportation options within the Communities of Interest who participated in focus groups. They see a link between transportation options and employment and believe that lack of transportation choices limits their employment opportunities. Youth want transportation for employment and independence, and seniors are also looking for independence and for transportation to medical appointments and medical care. It was noted that there is a lack of access to the Manchester airport, Boston, metro areas in the state, recreation areas, and northern New Hampshire. The need for communication about transportation in Spanish was also noted.

**Use of Cars**—Participants indicated that they rely on cars due to a lack of public transportation choices. Many have financial limitations, so there is a reliance on family members and informal volunteer networks for driving to basic services, shopping, and medical appointments. The high cost of travel via car and travel time was noted as a negative consequence of using cars for transportation. Youth rely on parents for transportation, and parents noted the impact on their time to accommodate their children.

**Public Transportation**—There was a strong opinion that there is a lack of public transportation options. Many of the focus groups noted a lack of evening and weekend hours to the existing transportation system as a barrier for them. There is a lack of public transportation to major cities, employment centers, and the northern part of the state. It is difficult to coordinate the limited transportation options. Affordability of transportation was occasionally noted as an issue. There are some public programs with transportation, but those were noted as significantly lacking. Taxi service, train service, bus service, and light rail were all mentioned as being desired.

**Pedestrian Access**—There was discussion of the need for increased pedestrian access in many communities. The ability to walk to work, school, stores, health care, and essential services was seen as important. Groups highlighted the need for sidewalks, increased pedestrian safety, and expanded accommodations for bicycles. There was concern that some communities are not bike friendly.

## *Housing*

Housing was a topic discussed by all focus groups except for groups of youth. Most of the discussion focused on the need for more affordable housing. The Communities of Interest indicated that they lacked access to affordable housing. There was a concern about affordability for the next generation and a desire for affordable housing in safe neighborhoods and along public transportation routes. There is a need for a variety of affordable housing types to accommodate needs of different groups, such as families and people with disabilities. Participants noted the link between housing and employment. Rents continue to increase, while income is not increasing.

Many families are sharing housing due to cost. This may help with expenses but can be challenging to families. Other household needs are not being met due to housing costs, and there is a reliance on local fuel assistance programs. There is a lack of housing for the homeless and a need for more homeless shelters.

Some expressed a concern that property taxes make housing costly and that less expensive housing is not built because of land costs.

## *Jobs/Employment*

In addition to transportation and housing, jobs were a major area of concern for the Communities of Interest. Participants saw employment and housing options as tied to transportation options.

**Job Opportunities**—The Communities of Interest expressed concerns about the lack of good paying jobs for themselves and/or their children. Jobs are seen as important to keeping youth in New Hampshire. They see high paying jobs as being in short supply and believe many people in their community are under-employed. They see little opportunity for advancement or to change jobs. Job training is needed, and there was a belief that the job market is changing and different skills are needed.

**Part-time Employment**—There are more options for part-time employment, but these jobs do not have benefits. Part-time jobs are also a challenge because they are often evening or weekend hours, and public transportation options are limited at those times.

**Employment Barriers**—Lack of transportation options is cited as a barrier to full employment. Other hurdles to employment success are language barriers and a lack of access to computers for web-based employment applications. Attitude toward low-income, homeless, and disabled populations can be a barrier, and employer education is needed in this area.

## **Additional Themes**

The following additional themes were discussed by Community of Interest focus groups. While these topics were mentioned less often than transportation, housing, and employment, there was still significant discussion on other topics by many groups. Due to the limited time frame and wide range of issues to cover, there was not an opportunity for in-depth discussion on these issues by the groups. A summary of the topics discussed is presented here.

- Social Services: The need for greater access to social services
- Youth Recreation: The need for youth recreation, in particular recreation for 14- to 18-year-olds who are not participating in high school sports

- School/Education: Concern for the quality of elementary, middle, and high schools and fear that education was not valued; lack of support for the value of education
- Youth Programs: The lack of programs for youth (other than recreation) to keep them busy and productive
- Adult Recreation: Lack of recreation opportunities and facilities for adults
- Roads: The poor condition of roads and the lack of investment in infrastructure
- Higher Education: Concern about the cost, access, and support for higher education
- Recycling/Energy Efficiency: An interest in learning more about energy efficiency
- Natural Resources: Placing a high value on the state's natural resources, protecting them and having access
- Food Access: Access to quality food that is affordable
- Broadband: Internet access, especially for connections to schools and possible employment
- Safety/Crime: Concern about safety and crime in some local communities
- Job Training: The lack of job training for existing employment opportunities
- Language: The language barrier, particularly with parents with elementary, middle, and high school children
- Health Care: Concern about access to and the affordability of health care
- Economic Development: The need for job development and support for new businesses
- Drugs: Concern about the availability of illegal drugs in some local communities
- Sense of Community: A concern that community members do not feel a sense of community where they live
- Utilities: The high cost of utilities
- Water Quality: Concern for the quality of water for drinking and recreation
- Keeping Young People in New Hampshire: Concern that young people are leaving for education and employment opportunities elsewhere and not returning to the state
- Downtown: The importance of downtown areas and concern for their viability

# Final Report: Outreach through Regional Community Conversations

How can we make our community the best place to live, learn, work, and play?

## Introduction

In the spring of 2013, over 500 New Hampshire residents met in ten different locations across the state to talk about their priorities, concerns, and ideas for the future of New Hampshire. At each site, participants met for three hours to share their thoughts, as well as to listen and engage with others.

Compiled here are the priority issues and ideas shared by those participants. New Hampshire Listens and University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension hosted these events in service to the nine New Hampshire Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs); the discussions provided input on topics impacting the multitude of issues with which regional plans are concerned.

### Communities of Place

A gathering of people who share a common local or regional geographic location.

These community conversations were advertised widely, and everyone was welcome to attend. In keeping with NH Listens' approach, the purpose of these deliberations was to engage people in a constructive conversation, not to advance a particular set of goals or solutions. All views and perspectives were recorded and integrated into the full report.

Conversations, such as those organized for the Granite State Future project, help to augment (not replace) traditional forms of government and policy making. What follows is a detailed description of the process, outcomes of the conversations, and an analysis of all small group reports that identify areas for further consideration and action.

## How NH Listens Collects and Reports Findings

UNH Cooperative Extension and NH Listens base this kind of community development work on small-group facilitated dialogue (typically eight to twelve participants per group) that produces specific findings, often in the form of concrete recommendations for action. Depending on the topic, the findings might be at a more general level, articulating broad sets of values or criteria for decision making. In others, the recommendations can be quite specific, articulating a particular project or approach. Whether a dialogue is constructed as a one-time event that stretches over several hours or multiple events occurring over several weeks, participants typically move through a four-stage process supported by the facilitator. These stages include:

1. Introductions and personal stories about how participants relate to the focus topic of the dialogue (including their prior experiences with and opinions about the topic)
2. Review of the available data on the topic to ensure common, comparable levels of knowledge among participants (sometimes through use of a data summary report of the type prepared by UNH Cooperative Extension and NH Listens for this project)
3. Analysis of the topic and its multiple dimensions, leading to selection by the group of a small number of key issues (three to four) that serve as the basis for subsequent discussion from which the group generates concrete actions and recommendations

4. In-depth discussion of the selected key issues and articulation of a final set of views, values, or recommended actions directed at relevant decision makers

Throughout the dialogue, facilitators and participants document the conversation on large flip charts and identify recurring statements or themes. That is, the information that is gleaned from each small group is inductively analyzed, moving from specific comments made by group members to general statements that represent the shared ideas and perspectives of the group. Both agreements and disagreements are recorded, to ensure that all points of view are heard and documented.

The participants in this project spent three hours on a weekday evening in a facilitated discussion about the future of the Granite State. This represents a significant amount of time (over 1,500 hours of total participation) for residents who typically do not spend time in this type of sustained conversation about their community and their state. It is significant that our overall summary shows evidence of substantially overlapping concerns. This input will be further analyzed by the RPCs as they foster regional cooperation among communities and develop comprehensive regional plans for transportation, land use, water resources, housing, economic development, emergency management, energy, and other planning matters.

### The Conversations

NH Listens, UNH Cooperative Extension, and the RPCs had a goal of recruiting participants from across the state representing multiple perspectives and communities. Outreach was conducted statewide through email and personal contact by RPC staff (see Appendix B: Invitation to Participants). This ambitious effort to seek broad participation in planning was enabled by the grant funding and is aimed at solving complex planning problems with increased access to information and a greater representation of constituents across regions.

There was much interest in the topic, and over 500 people registered and participated in the sessions held between February 26 and May 14, 2013. Participants represented over 115 different towns in New Hampshire. The following locations were chosen to make sure there was a distribution of sites across the state:

Location	# of Participants	# of Small Groups
Claremont	68	5
Dover	43	4
Plymouth	24	3
Keene	48	4
Manchester	35	3
Berlin	35	3
Pembroke	33	4
Nashua	74	6
Laconia	113	8
<u>Kingston</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>5</u>
<b>Total</b>	<b>528</b>	<b>45</b>

After each conversation, a brief summary of themes was sent to participants from that particular regional event. The purpose of this summary was to give timely feedback on general results since the project itself and the final report writing would span several months. Regional themes can be found in Appendix D.

## Focus Questions

In conjunction with RPCs, UNH Cooperative Extension and NH Listens developed a set of focus questions to guide the discussion. These questions were based on key planning topics and the NH Livability Principles in order to encourage integration across planning topics. The questions were:

- Regarding our changing population, how would our policies and practices need to change if we wanted to attract the 20-something's or 30-something's to the state? How do we need to prepare communities for the ultimate retirement of New Hampshire's substantial middle-aged population in the workforce? What infrastructure will we need to support our aging population?
- Regarding land use and community centers, what is the appropriate role for local planning and zoning?
- Regarding housing and transportation, are workers satisfied with their housing and transportation options relative to their work? Are there barriers to having diverse land uses such as housing, businesses, and offices in the same location? If so, what are they? Who is most impacted by these barriers? What would change if more people of various income levels had access to a variety of modes of transportation?
- Regarding our natural resources and climate, what is needed for us to keep New Hampshire as good or better for future generations? What are the most important long-range decisions we need to make as a region and a state?
- With employers looking for strong, educated labor pools, access to contemporary information (broadband) and transportation infrastructures, what needs to be done to keep us competitive economically?

After introductions within each small group and a general exploration of various issues, participants were asked to explore the information provided in the discussion guide (see Appendix C). The discussion guide adapted information from a variety of sources which can be found at [www.granitestatefuture.org](http://www.granitestatefuture.org). The information was used to expose participants to a variety of issues, but the focus of the conversation followed the interests of the participants. Facilitators asked, "What do you notice about this information?" Often following up with prompting questions, such as, "What stands out to you? What is most important to you? What seems like the most critical aspect of this challenge?" The final questions posed on each topic were:

- What are the issues, barriers, challenges, and opportunities related to this topic?
- What actions need to be taken over the next twenty-five years?
- What actions would move us forward on the issues of concern to you?

## Key Findings

The following is a summary of the themes and priorities noted most frequently across all forty-five small groups in all ten locations across the state. Although each group expressed some regional differences and issues pertinent to the towns and communities where participants live, general themes emerged across regions related to trends and challenges facing the state of New Hampshire overall. This report reflects broad themes that majorities of participants in the regional groups identified as important and critical to the future of New Hampshire.

As a summary and analysis of the input shared by participants, some topics arose directly from the discussion guide and were explored in significant ways by participants. This was true, for example, for transportation and the changing demographics of the state. Other topics were more a result of input by

participants. This occurred in the case of education, as it was seen as a significant factor in economic vitality. Similarly, health care was a significant concern and was often raised in connection with our aging population.

Although a range of topics was discussed at each regional event, certain topics were of particular interest to participants across the state of New Hampshire. The most frequently discussed issues included:

- Employment and educational opportunity
- Youth
- Senior citizens
- Transportation
- Housing
- Taxes and state and municipal funding
- Zoning and development
- Environment and natural resources
- Infrastructure needs

Of these issues, *every* small group in *every* regional location across the state involved in the Granite State Future project spent time discussing employment and educational opportunity, youth, senior citizens, transportation, and housing, and *most* groups discussed taxes and funding, zoning and development, the environment and natural resources, and infrastructure needs. The notes from each small group at each location can be found in Appendix E.

In the findings below, we have ordered the focus areas within the discussion guide to reflect those themes and issues most frequently discussed by participants. While our process did not ask participants to reach consensus, our analysis attempts to highlight areas of disagreement and areas of significant common ground. For the purposes of the report, key findings are organized in the following manner to show how themes are interrelated:

- The beauty and strength of New Hampshire
- Community and economic vitality
- Where we live and how we move around
- Who we are and how we are changing
- Environment, energy, and impacts
- How we use land and the impacts of our choices
- The role of government

### ***The Beauty and Strength of New Hampshire***

Before addressing areas of focus from the discussion guide, it should be noted that from small group to small group, and region to region, participants inevitably spent some time expressing their appreciation for the natural beauty of New Hampshire. Many felt our surroundings had a significant impact on their decision to move to New Hampshire or to remain here. The desire to sustain the natural beauty of the state was expressed repeatedly. However, these shared concerns around the beauty of New Hampshire resulted in fewer concrete recommendations across groups and regions. Our values here are strong but diffuse and therefore harder to focus into shared action steps. In contrast, so many participants connected jobs, education, transportation, and housing that an understanding of these values tended to result in more frequent concrete recommendations for action. Still, the strength of living in a beautiful environment was seen as one of our greatest assets, along with a sense that New Hampshire residents are deeply engaged in their communities.

## ***Community and Economic Vitality***

All of the small groups spent some time grappling with the impact of employment and economic development on the vitality and health of their community and the state. The primary drivers of the conversation centered on opportunities for a quality education for children, affordable higher education, and access to employment with “good benefits.” Both were highly connected by participants to access to transportation options and affordable housing. Many participants were concerned that it be possible “for hardworking families to thrive.”

### **Employment and Economic Development**

All forty-five groups in all ten of the regions discussed aspects of unemployment, job growth, and economic development. Some participants felt that there is a lack of jobs overall, while other communities felt there is a lack of jobs that are an appropriate fit with the skill levels in the state. Several participants mentioned the lack of jobs with good benefits. In particular, many groups expressed concern that there are not enough jobs for high skilled workers, making it harder to change jobs and remain within in the state. The Berlin regional conversation participants commented that the jobs available are low-paying service sector jobs. Claremont regional conversation participants expressed a desire for jobs that require skilled labor and concerns that businesses may choose not to come to the region due to a lack of a trained workforce.

Many groups commented on the lack of adequate training for job requirements in the state. Several communities felt that their regions need to offer more effective job training—both for college educated and non-college educated individuals. Both Keene and Pembroke participants felt that partnerships between schools and businesses might facilitate more effective job training. Claremont, Pembroke, and Dover participants were also interested in partnerships between the private sector and local community. Many communities were interested in economic development and support of business growth, particularly small businesses.

There were five locations where an interest in expanding tourism was expressed. There was a desire to balance tourism with New Hampshire’s natural beauty. In the Berlin region, participants saw tourism in the North Country as a major economic force. Plymouth participants also felt that tourism was a driving force in the community, and that business could be inconsistent from season to season. In the Kingston region, there was a concern that tourists enter the area simply to buy cigarettes and alcohol.

### **Educational Opportunity**

Education was discussed repeatedly and most often in the context of the importance of young people in New Hampshire having access to quality K–12 education and affordable higher education. These themes will be explored in more detail under Youth. As noted above, a strong connection was made by participants between educational opportunity and employment options, and there was concern across participants and regions that we will see decreasing levels of both.

### **Concerns about Taxes and Funding**

There was a general concern about taxes and state funding in all of the small groups throughout the state. Many groups felt that taxes are too high. Others felt they are too high and too singularly drawn from property taxes. Some noted that we are known for our “tax advantages” and did not see taxes as too high per se, although many groups commented that the state is overly reliant on property taxes. There was a concern that high property taxes make homeownership difficult or even prohibitive.

Gas taxes were often discussed, and some groups felt that these taxes are unfairly high and unfairly distributed. Others noted that this tax has not increased in several years. Many groups questioned the fairness of the current tax structure or expressed the need for more equitable and more diverse forms of taxation, although there was controversy about what equitable taxes meant.

Some groups felt taxes aren't funding the right services. There were also concerns about a lack of state funding for particular services and programs, including schools and health care. Many groups commented on how tax incentives for small businesses might attract more economic development to the state. Some groups discussed the relationship between taxes and the environment—for instance, some regions discussed how tax incentives for green home or business improvement could be effective. One group commented that Keene provides tax credits for solar improvements.

Some groups expressed concerns over state and local budget cuts. Certain needs were identified, but the pathways to funding these needs varied and were sometimes controversial.

### ***Who We Are and How We Are Changing***

The initial focus of discussion in these regional conversations shared information on current and future demographic changes in New Hampshire. It matters to people that New Hampshire offer appealing opportunities for young people and that our older adults, as they age, can age “in place” and age in ways that provide dignity and independence. This was discussed repeatedly by all groups. Participants spent time focused on population changes in both youth and senior citizens, with a particular awareness of how a significant skew in our overall population can impact revenues and community and economic vitality.

### **Keeping and Educating Youth**

All forty-five groups in all ten of the regional locations involved in the Granite State Future project discussed issues related to youth in the state of New Hampshire. The majority of groups expressed concern about youth migration out of New Hampshire and discussed ways that their communities can retain and attract young people. For instance, the Berlin participants discussed “brain drain” in their region and how they need incentives to bring young people back to the region after college. Other groups discussed the quality and cost of higher education and the need for support for higher education, including the Community College system in New Hampshire.

Some groups felt that the high cost of higher education deters young people from remaining in the state. Others felt that there is a lack of job opportunities for youth and recent college graduates. Some participants believed that the lack of affordable housing drives young people out of the state. Though there was no agreed-upon cause for youth migration from New Hampshire, there was some agreement among regions that communities and towns, as well as the state overall, should contemplate effective ways to encourage young people to work, go to school, and live in our state.

Several groups expressed concern about the quality of K–12 education in New Hampshire and commented on the varying quality of schools, depending on the town or region of the state that people reside in. Dover and Keene participants commented on problems created by a lack of state funding for local schools. After-school programs and programs for teenagers were also mentioned as important factors for supporting young people.

Participants in Claremont, Plymouth, and Nashua expressed concerns over a lack of child care in their regions. Child care needs were also raised in the context of employers playing a role in providing access to onsite care.

The topic of civics education was mentioned across several regions. There was interest in educating young people on how to participate in their community and how government works and decisions are made. We suspect the kinds of people who participated in these conversations place a high value on civic engagement by virtue of their participation. Still, being connected to one's community was often mentioned more broadly by participants, including building community locally and helping people find ways to connect positively to community efforts. Many participants mentioned that a strong turnout at community conversations is evidence of our strength as a civically engaged state.

### **Older Adults Aging Independently and Healthfully**

All forty-five groups in all ten of the regional locations discussed changes and challenges that growing senior citizen populations in the state will pose to their individual communities. Groups explored questions about the care of elders overall and how they will access and afford health care and other services. Many groups expressed concerns about how seniors who could no longer drive would access transportation yet maintain independence. There was also discussion about the relationships between older adults and taxes; some groups felt that as the population aged, tax revenue bases and the growth of the economy might slow. Other groups discussed how retirees might move to the state because of the existing tax structure, further skewing our population toward seniors. Similar to youth populations, there were no certain answers in terms of how to respond to growing senior populations, but the need for planning to take place in local communities was evident to participants—including the need for young people to be trained in the multiple health care careers relevant to senior citizens. Some participants felt that no government resources should be used to support seniors as families, churches, and neighbors should serve this need.

### **Health Care**

Several groups expressed concern about affordable health care, although there was significant disagreement about how to achieve this goal. The issue was discussed often, but the complexity of the issue—combined with a relatively tight timeline—meant groups often did not explore this issue in depth. Still, it is of great concern to a variety of participants across the state, along with access to mental health care and care for those dealing with substance abuse.

### ***Where We Live and How We Move Around***

The aging infrastructure of the state as a whole was often discussed. These conversations show significant concerns regarding long-term investment in transportation, housing, and communication infrastructure, as these topics were raised repeatedly by participants.

### **Infrastructure Investments**

Many groups commented on a need for a more effective and updated infrastructure within their communities, but regions viewed infrastructure differently. Some communities saw infrastructure as the upkeep of roads, bridges, and town buildings. Participants in more northern regions—such as Laconia, Plymouth, and Berlin—expressed difficulties with communication infrastructure, particularly reliable internet access. Kingston participants discussed a desire for an infrastructure in their region that is generally more supportive of technology and a new economy. While water quality was often mentioned, the infrastructure to support it was not. There was a general recognition that technology infrastructure can change how we work and where we live. A number of regions mentioned creative and entrepreneurial opportunities linked to better broadband access across the state.

## **Public Transit and Transportation Options**

All forty-five groups in all ten of the regional locations discussed some aspect of transportation in relation to their regions. There was recognition of limitations that exist in such a heavily car-dependent state. The majority of groups were concerned about accessible and affordable transportation, and many mentioned the impact of long commute times on lifestyle.

In particular, a need was identified to ensure that certain populations have access to transportation, including youth and seniors, as well as low-income individuals and people with disabilities. In some communities, there is currently little access to essential services like medical treatment and groceries for individuals without cars.

Beyond access, groups talked about the need for more transportation offerings and a greater variety of offerings and also the health and lifestyle improvements that can come with being able to bike or walk to work or to town centers. Safety when biking and walking was an issue in some communities, especially where sidewalks are minimal. Many participants mentioned that young people are attracted to cities and towns where they have access to public transportation, and high speed rail was mentioned a few times as an attractive commuting option if the service were available.

Some groups discussed a need for more effective transportation between New Hampshire's cities, such as Concord, Nashua, and Manchester, valuing opportunities for communities to be connected for economic and social reasons. There were references to connecting communities in the Upper Valley, as well as the need for an east-west corridor in the state.

Many groups commented on the need for increased and more effective transportation, but groups were less clear about how to fund these services. Some participants saw increased public funds as the solution, whereas other participants favored increased volunteer services or private sector outreach in the community. Several groups expressed interest in developing alternative forms of transportation, including reinstating rail access in the North Country, community development that encourages walking and biking, and consistent bus service.

## **Affordable, Accessible, and Appealing Housing**

All forty-five groups in all ten of the regional locations commented on the need for improved housing offerings in their communities, including more affordable, appealing, and available housing. Many groups expressed concern that housing in their communities is too expensive. For instance, participants in Claremont and Pembroke commented that their regions might be more attractive to workers if housing were more affordable. In some communities, a lack of available housing was noted—"workforce housing," in particular. For instance, in the Berlin region, there are waiting lists for many housing units. Many groups made direct connections between transportation and housing. Housing is often located far from jobs and the town center so that, without public transit, it is challenging for individuals without a car to work or access essential services.

Efforts that would increase choices in housing and transportation options were generally seen favorably. Although there was concern among some groups about government subsidized housing and transportation, more people were concerned about barriers to home ownership and having a variety of housing and transportation options for a mix of income levels.

## ***Environment, Energy, and Impacts***

As mentioned previously, living in such a naturally beautiful place was deeply appreciated and often discussed. When participants focused specifically on the environment, preservation and energy were on their minds.

### **Preserving and Managing our Natural Resources**

Most of the regional groups were concerned about the future of the environment and natural resources in the state. Discussion on the environment ranged from pollution to water, climate change, energy, natural resources, and agriculture. Discussions about water included many subjects, such as water quality, water shortages, storm water runoff, and pollution. Preserving water quality received a fair amount of attention among the natural resources of concern to participants. Participants also talked about supporting local agriculture and maintaining the “rural character” of New Hampshire.

### **A Focus on Energy Diversity, Efficiency, and Costs**

Many of the groups discussed topics related to energy, including the cost of energy, energy efficiency, diversification of energy sources, and incentives to use alternative energy. A range of energy sources was discussed, including pellet stoves, solar energy, wind power, and oil and other carbon-based energy. Dover participants discussed how energy use needs to become more diversified and that communities should plan for multiuse facilities (adaptive technology that can run on both natural gas and wood pellets, for example). Plymouth participants commented that carbon-based energy is not sustainable in the long term but that it is difficult and expensive to produce alternative energy. Those in Keene commented that the state provides little incentive for people to create and use alternative energy. Laconia participants discussed a desire to have more strategic and extended conversations about steps for the future in relation to energy and fuel cost conservation. Many experienced what they see as high electric bills and noted that there are few incentives to make homes energy efficient. In fact, some participants mentioned that there are policy and financial “disincentives to do the right thing” and that there should be greater tax incentives for green home improvements, for example.

### **Beyond Climate Change to Impacts**

There was some talk in groups about climate change, although the roots of this issue were debated, especially the prediction of ultimate impacts or the identification of causal relationships. When groups focused on local issues and impacts of changes in weather patterns (such as intense storms, increased flooding, and changes in the growing season), participants were more engaged in noticing concrete impacts (such as an increase in flood insurance rates). Participants were very aware of the politicized nature of the topic and were more drawn to practical impacts than debating political views.

## ***How We Use Land and the Impacts of Our Choices***

Many groups discussed issues related to land use; often participants spoke of both the barriers caused by regulations and conservation, as well as a balanced need for both. It was not uncommon to hear participants seeking greater balance between the tensions inherent in these kinds of issues. For example, many spoke strongly in defense of private property rights, and yet they were also very disappointed in seeing windmills located on private property appear in their mountain vista. Similarly, many appreciated the conservation of land but wanted greater public access to trails. These tensions continued to surface in discussions regarding zoning, land conservation, and property rights—three areas that received a high level of attention across groups in the statewide conversations.

## **Zoning and Development**

Most of the regions involved in the Granite State Future conversations spent time discussing zoning and development. Many groups expressed a desire to balance economic development with the preservation of natural resources and the local character of their communities. This message was consistent across regions and accompanied a value of foresight in planning and zoning decisions. In Kingston, the region discussed a desire to maintain the local charm of the area and a clean and healthy natural environment balanced with economic development. Berlin regional participants expressed a desire to preserve the beauty of the North Country, while still allowing development. Many groups expressed an interest in encouraging tourism while maintaining New Hampshire's natural beauty.

Several communities expressed frustration over zoning laws and regulations. Participants in Keene and Manchester were both interested in repurposing existing buildings and transforming them into new industry but felt there were undue burdens to doing so. Several groups were interested in encouraging local agriculture and preserving natural resources and building up local agriculture and farming. A consistent value for local control was expressed, including a value for communities to determine and preserve their own identities.

## **Land Conservation Perceptions**

The issue of land conservation was raised consistently across regions but with a variety of perceptions. Some participants in the Manchester area, for example, expressed a frustration with land conservation, believing it to be a way to “give land to the government.” Others have worked locally to use conservation to preserve the rural character of their towns. Land conservation was an area where there were a number of questions regarding tax implications, property rights, and access for recreation.

## **Protecting Property Rights**

Property rights were discussed consistently when issues of land use and natural resources were raised, particularly as related to water. For some participants, there seemed to be desire to ensure that a tradition of individual rights continue to inform decisions, consistent with a libertarian culture in New Hampshire. For others, community and individual concerns were a complicated and delicate balance requiring ongoing and persistent effort.

## ***The Role of Government***

The participants engaged repeatedly in conversations about the complexities and tensions associated with identifying the appropriate role of government—local, regional, state, and federal—in addressing challenges faced by our state. So many of the issues discussed lent themselves to deliberation over who bears responsibility and who should shoulder the expense. In particular, there were many voices advocating for increased communication, collaboration, and transparency in government, across agencies, and with everyday citizens. Most participants found some value in regional cooperation but were cautious of a loss of local control. In addition, some individuals were critical of too much government oversight and regulation, reiterating that “government should not get in the way.”

Many groups commented on the need for further work on the topics discussed at the Granite State Future conversations. It should also be noted that several participants expressed concern that these conversations, along with the other Granite State Future activities, would lead to increased federal involvement in their communities. Nonetheless, participants repeatedly appreciated the opportunity to talk with one another despite their differences of opinion, and the need for productive ways to engage people was mentioned as a value across regions.

## **Regional Differences**

Although the regional groups shared many themes in common, various regions also expressed differences according to their unique communities.

### ***Berlin***

The North Country regional groups expressed concern that their region did not receive enough attention in the New Hampshire legislature. North Country participants felt that there is higher poverty in the North Country due to various factors, such as a lack of good jobs, a high cost of living, long drives to job opportunities, and high property tax rates. North Country residents felt that they use more gas than other regions and pay a lot in gas taxes but do not receive equitable road maintenance from the state.

As action items, North Country residents expressed interest in tourism development as an economic force. Participants felt that a railroad could bring more business to the north. There was also an interest in continuing to support White Mountains Community College since it is the lone source of higher education in the region. Some groups felt they would like to increase recycling efforts in communities such as Berlin, Lancaster, and Littleton.

### ***Claremont***

Claremont participants expressed a particular interest in building infrastructure such as roads and bridges. There was a concern that the growing senior population in the Upper Valley will need increased transportation. Some groups discussed how existing services are underused and how increased public awareness about alternative programs and services would be helpful.

### ***Dover***

State and local budget cuts were of particular concern in the Dover area. Participants questioned why a wealthy state such as New Hampshire is cutting budgets and what potential alternative revenue structures might exist. There was conversation about unevenness in employment rates in Strafford County; some communities seem to be struggling, while others are thriving.

Despite some existing public transportation, there are still parts of the area that are not served by these resources, and a stigma—particularly by older generations—is associated with using public transportation.

There was some conversation about a lack of civics education in schools. There was also a concern about how to access public officials and decision makers.

In addition, EPA quality standards were of concern to many individuals.

### ***Keene***

Some groups in Keene felt that Cheshire County does not have the same kind of voice represented through state leadership as do other regions. The regional group pointed to a need for increased collaboration among local, state, and federal officials.

Groups felt that, although there is access to transportation and services near Keene, communities located farther from Keene are less likely to have these offerings.

Taxes were of concern since Keene's property taxes are the fourth highest in the state.

There was a particular concern about storm water runoff.

There was a sense in Keene that community is important. Keene participants expressed interest in encouraging young people to get involved with their community. They also mentioned that young people in the region need greater access to recreational activities.

### ***Kingston***

As a region bordering Massachusetts, the Kingston area groups expressed concern about losing youth to the Boston area. The groups also felt that tourism in the area is complicated; there was an interest in attracting tourism, but many groups felt that tourists just come over the border to purchase cigarettes and alcohol.

There was a sentiment in Kingston that seniors are an untapped potential that need to be utilized in the community. There was discussion about building safer and healthier communities and for more effective communication among towns in the region. The Kingston regional groups also placed particular emphasis on a balance between economic development, expansion of technology, and preserving local character and natural resources.

### ***Laconia***

Several groups in Laconia discussed a decline in the numbers of school-aged children and an influx of immigrant and refugee populations. Some groups discussed how individuals who live in the community work elsewhere, or vice versa. Several groups discussed the complexity of land use conservation. Laconia area participants discussed ways that drug and alcohol use and crime affect the community. Some groups felt that there are differences in water quality from town to town in the region.

### ***Manchester***

The Manchester region discussed some unique challenges, such as poverty rates and public school quality and crowding. The regional groups questioned what being a designated refugee resettlement city means for the future of the Manchester region and if the city has the resources to serve in this capacity. There was concern expressed about the HUD funding of the Granite State Future project and its association with the federal government.

### ***Nashua***

The Nashua region expressed particular interest in making the community an attractive place for people to live, work, and enjoy recreationally. Part of the discussion focused on the city's layout and downtown area, and how to encourage and strengthen Nashua's local identity and charm. Access to mental health care was a concern for half of the groups that participated in the Nashua regional conversation.

### ***Pembroke***

Pembroke regional participants discussed the importance of community colleges in the area and how these institutions should collaborate with local businesses to stimulate job growth. Many groups discussed the deterioration of bridges and road quality and the funds needed to update this infrastructure. Some participants questioned the validity of the information included in the discussion guide.

## ***Plymouth***

There was a particular focus on a lack of internet access in the Plymouth region. Participants also discussed the lack of access to essential services, such as police, fire, and emergency services. There was a concern that cars are essential to living and getting around the regional area. Groups also expressed concern about a large disparity in local housing—wealthier, often seasonal property owners contribute high taxes, while lower income individuals are left with run-down, substandard housing that is still quite expensive. Tourism is a large part of the local economy, and the inconsistency of tourism from year to year and season to season creates complications for the regional area. There was a sentiment in the area that communities need to work collaboratively to create solutions to regional problems.

## **Participant Evaluation Summary**

NH Listens surveyed all participants about their experience of the process and received 267 responses (a 50 percent return rate). A full summary of the results is provided in Appendix F. Much of this feedback assists NH Listens in improving facilitation and engagement for future events.

The conversations received mixed reviews. They were highly rated, as can be seen in the 89 percent of participants expressing, “I am glad I participated in these conversations” and 81 percent agreeing that “our group talked about the most important issues.” Similarly, most participants felt everyone had “an equal chance to express their views” (89 percent).

Still, this project was seen as controversial for reasons stated earlier, and some participants felt their views would not be represented fairly. For example, while most participants felt they learned something new from other members of their group (79 percent), a smaller majority (55 percent of participants) indicated the conversation helped them to have “a better understanding of people who I disagree with and their opinions.” The small group facilitators were rated highly across the project with participants indicating that facilitators “helped the group set ground rules and stick to them” (90 percent) and “helped us talk about different points of view” (85 percent).

## **Conclusion**

Several hundred engaged and committed people came out on a weekday evening across multiple sites in New Hampshire to discuss their concerns and priorities for the future of New Hampshire. This report was compiled to assist participants, as well as the Regional Planning Commissions, as they determine the best ways to plan for our future.

Participants at these sessions spent a significant amount of time discussing employment and educational opportunity, transportation and housing, demographic changes in New Hampshire in regards to youth and seniors, energy and natural resources, and land use. Decision makers utilizing this report can consider participants’ perceptions and recommendations. Collectively, we have indicated topics of importance for reflection and next steps.