SOCIAL CAPITAL IN ACTION: 
THE RE-BRANDING OF A RURAL COMMUNITY

Racheal Stuart

NH Charitable Foundation – Neil and Louise Tillotson Fund

October 4, 2011
This multi-method case study explores how a rural county’s stock of social capital was expanded and strategically used to advance its economic revitalization goals.
Wealth type: Social Capital

- Bonding social capital: Within-group ties
- Bridging social capital: Crosscutting ties between individuals in different groups, and between/among groups
- Cognitive social capital – civic attitudes, feelings of trust
- Structural social capital – civic organizations/associations, structured opportunities for social interaction

Social capital is a productive resource; fungible; used to produce more capital – both social and economic capital
Context – Coös County has…

• Loss of manufacturing
• Deep history of dependency on elite class of mill owners
• Lowest political representation

And…

• Great natural beauty
• Deep community pride and loyalty
• High degree of social capital
Coös County: High Social Capital

High levels of neighborly trust & community attachment

- 94%: People willing to help neighbors
- 89%: People trust one another and get along
- 82%: People would work together on a local problem
- 57% Volunteer in the community

[Source: CERA 2010]
Social Capital & Economic Development

- Many studies document a positive link between community social capital and economic development
- Most focus on local level, intra-community resources
- Rural America needs larger scale, inter-community cooperation, regional thinking, regional projects

Research question: Can intra-community resources be mobilized to achieve inter-community, region-wide cooperation?
Northern NH Branding Project: New Hampshire Grand

• Funded by local, well-known foundation

• Led by competent and charismatic professional tourism consultant

• Managed by well-regarded internal regional economic development organization

• Systematic forging of region-wide bridging social capital
Rebranding successful

- Coos has a new tourism brand
- "New Hampshire Grand: Grand Resorts, Grand Adventures", live website; supporting brochures; "Best of" certification
Bridging Challenges

- Local community attachments: cognitive and structural
- Community wariness of tourism as menial service work, unlike manufacturing
- Coos already has a tourism brand: “Great North Woods”
- To make tourism work must have hospitality attitude
  - Negative impact of social ties
Bridging Fissures in Coös County

- Economic success of rebranding dependent on tourists and their revenue
- New signage strategically important
- Grant application blocked by County Commissioners
  - Marginalized in the process - not proactively courted, tend not to participate in Coos Symposia
- The cultural and institutional gaps between local politicians and economic and other community leaders needed bridging
Forging of Bridging Ties: Coös Symposium
Coös Symposium – Another View
Wealth-creation Results

• Local community capital can be scaled upwards to achieve regional economic development goals
  • Adoption of the brand*

• Systematic use of existing local social capital resources for regional bridging purposes
  • Creation of the Brand Leadership Team (BLT)
  • Collaboration of the region’s 5 chambers of commerce

* Ongoing work required!!
Practical Advice

• Social capital brokers matter

• Need to create opportunities and venues for structured social interaction around purposeful goals

• Capital resources have to be harnessed and put to work; social capital does not automatically create economic or more social capital
Acknowledgements

Professor Michele Dillon - Department of Sociology and the Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire

Janet Topolsky, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group

Carole Martin, Consultant
Racheal Stuart
Senior Program Director,
New Hampshire Charitable Foundation
rs@nhcf.org

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