

Ashfield MVP Community Dinner #1

Summary

Overview -

On December 5, 2024 from 5:30 - 7:30pm, members of the Ashfield community gathered for a community dinner and discussion at the Double Edge Theatre pavilion. The event was hosted as part of the Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and Living Culture Project, funded by the Massachusetts Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) Program, and led by the Town of Ashfield in partnership with Double Edge Theatre, climate and cultural strategists Lauren de la Parra and Holly Jacobson, Ohketeau Cultural Center, and the Arts Extension Service at UMass Amherst.

Background on the Project -

The goal of the project is to address the question: ***What does climate resilience look like for Ashfield?*** Between December 2024 and June 2025 the project will include community dinners and dialogues at different Ashfield locations, site tours, and a community resilience day. This community dinner was the first of three. Collectively, through these activities the project aims to:

- Create new opportunities for local organizations, community members and Town staff to discuss goals and ideas related to three key resilience topics in Ashfield: clean energy, nature-based resilience solutions, and affordable housing;
- Identify avenues for community partners and the Town to collaborate on future projects and grant proposals to achieve community goals related to the project focus areas;
- Grow Ashfield's potential for creative collaboration and leadership on rural climate and community resilience in the region.

Who joined the dinner?

The dinner was open to all Ashfield residents (as space allowed!). Invitations were sent out to wide cross-section of the Ashfield community – Town staff and committee members, local farms and businesses, landowners, emergency management personnel, artists, and regional organizations, among others – and flyers were distributed on social media and in public spaces around town. Roughly thirty members of the Ashfield community, spanning older adults to middle schoolers, joined the community dinner. Reimbursement for childcare was made available for parents and other caregivers to facilitate attendance.

What took place?

Double Edge Theatre welcomed everyone to the dinner, starting with a land acknowledgement and sharing the context for the project and the spirit of gathering together in community. The conversation then circled the room, as everyone introduced themselves and shared a little bit about their favorite place in Ashfield. From there, the conversation opened up to sharing stories, anecdotes, concerns, and ideas related to the prompt: *What makes your daily life in Ashfield more challenging? What makes it easier to navigate the challenges?* After talking at length – on topics ranging from housing affordability, to the viability of farming in Ashfield, to ecosystem changes from climate disruption – the group broke for dinner. But the conversations didn't end there! Community members continued to make connections, highlight concerns, and brainstorm ideas over a hearty meal of homemade chili and delicious desserts. A survey was sent out afterwards to capture people's thoughts about what stood out to them from the evening's conversations and what they are continuing to think about after the event.

Summary of the Discussion -

- The group started with introductions and shared a collective appreciation for the beauty and community of Ashfield.
- Several people reiterated the value of opportunities to come together across differences at a time when the country feels particularly politically divided.
- Many different yet interconnected concerns were expressed about the present-day and long-term impacts of sprawling development and climate change on the community's ability to adapt and thrive into the future.
 - Attendees shared ideas for tackling this concern, including increased conservation for ecosystem services and habitat protection and alternatives to the large-lot single-family development conventions of the past.
- This also connected back to affordable housing for many, and several attendees expressed enthusiasm for the potential of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) and more communally-oriented development patterns (e.g. smaller lots, cohousing communities, multi-generational models, walkability to Town, etc.) to help prevent displacement and enable more young people to stay or move into the region.
- Another major theme was the notion of socioeconomic change, particularly the challenges of making a living from the land (e.g. farmers, tradespeople) and the connections to food security and resilience. Ashfield has been a farming community historically, and residents expressed eagerness to support local agriculture in creative ways.

- The group also discussed the potential of renewable energy to support community resilience, including farm resilience. Climate vulnerabilities in rural areas can create specific challenges including isolation and long delays post-disaster, so the value of self-sufficiency was emphasized.

Takeaways and Next Steps -

- Overall, the group expressed a strong desire for action - to work together and use this opportunity to build momentum and start to pursue concrete ideas.
- There's interest in advancing the resilience hub concept.
 - Action: Compile research on rural resilience hub models to support ongoing community conversations about what a rural resilience hub could look like in Ashfield.
 - Action: Share this research back with the community through subsequent community dinners and other project outreach and engagement channels.
- There's a need to continue ongoing outreach to make sure the project is reaching and engaging all corners of Ashfield.
 - Action: Connect with volunteer firefighters, the Rod and Gun Club, Snowmobile Association, Belding Memorial Library, Mohawk Regional High School, and additional local businesses, among others.
 - Action: Hold conversations outside the community dinners to meet people where they are, build trust, and learn what is needed to facilitate broad-based participation in critical community resilience conversations and action.
- Affordable housing is a major concern and priority for many Ashfield residents, and attendees proposed many innovative strategies that the community can explore.
 - Action: Support and elevate creative strategies and explore new and proven pathways for making affordable housing easier to access and more feasible to create/develop in Ashfield.
- Economic and food security are two intimately interconnected issues in Ashfield, and residents care deeply about supporting local agriculture and other land-based professions and trades.
- There is a need for continual Indigenous involvement and engagement. Indigeneity and discussions of climate/land are interconnected and cannot be separated if we are to create an atmosphere of non-erasing practices and a (better) bridged community.

- Ohketeau Cultural Center were not able to attend this meeting although will co-lead the next MVP Community Dinner.

What's next?

The next community dinner will be hosted on January 30th from 6:00 - 8:00pm at the Ashfield Community Hall.