

Ashfield MVP Community Dinner #2

Summary

Overview -

On January 30, 2025 from 6:00 - 8:00pm, members of the Ashfield community gathered for a community dinner and discussion at the Ashfield Community Hall. 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, Ohketeau Cultural Center, climate and cultural strategists Lauren de la Parra and Holly Jacobson, 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 includes community dinners and dialogues at different Ashfield locations, site tours, and a community resilience day. This community dinner was the second 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 a 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. Community members who attended the first dinner were invited back, and new outreach focused on connecting with areas of the Ashfield community that the project had yet to reach. Roughly thirty members of the Ashfield community, spanning young adults to older adults, joined the community dinner.

Reimbursement for childcare was made available for parents and other caregivers to facilitate attendance.

What took place?

Community members began arriving at the Community Hall at 5:30 for light refreshments, before gathering together upstairs. Larry Spotted Crow Mann of Ohketeau Cultural Center and citizen of the Hassanamisco Nipmuc Tribe welcomed everyone to the dinner and performed two traditional songs, sharing their messages of preparing, healing, and connection across generations past and future. Adam Bright of Double Edge Theatre then provided everyone with context on the project, emphasizing the opportunity to come together in community, and gave a quick recap on the themes that had emerged from the [first Community Dinner](#) to continue building off those ideas. After a full round of introductions, Kim Pevia of Ohketeau Cultural Center introduced the structure of a Story Circle.

Rooted in civil rights movements in the South, Story Circles are a way to ensure stories are heard and that everyone has a chance to share. The room broke into a collection of circles, with roughly four people each. Everyone in each circle had a set period of time to tell a story – in this case, about their **vision for the future of Ashfield**. Kim invited the room to use our imaginations for innovation, to share the big audacious ideas, and to lean into what it would be like to live that vision. After telling stories, each circle then spent five minutes “cross-talking,” discussing what they heard from each other and weaving the stories together. Each circle then shared out to the full group from their discussion.

Many common themes resonated across the groups and Kim encouraged reaching out to each other, grabbing what is resonating, and running with it, to carry these visions forward. While the group broke for dinner, the conversations continued over a meal of winter squash succotash, maple tamari salmon and tofu, cabbage salad, and 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 -

- There’s a desire to make the town welcoming and accessible to folks of all different backgrounds. Many people highlighted wanting to make it possible for young people to come back after college, for families to settle down here, for climate refugees to find a home here, and for older adults to age in place.

- There's widespread desire to make the cost of living and housing truly affordable for all Ashfield residents, present and future. The group focused on opportunities for creating affordable and accessible housing through creative models like co-housing, enabling accessory dwelling units (ADUs), making it easier to build one's own home, and expanding housing in downtown where it's more walkable. There was also a focus on building more sustainable housing, and finding ways to overcome obstacles around solutions such as solar, EVs, and tiny homes.
- There's a strong desire to conserve and celebrate agriculture in town. Folks emphasized the importance of thinking about food security and housing together, making farming viable for aging and young farmers, and protecting sustainable food sources from climate impacts.
- There was wide recognition that nature can sometimes heal itself if we let it, but also requires proactive human care. There was interest in creating agreements across different viewpoints for how to deal with invasive species, conserve resources like farmland, and working together at a watershed scale to protect against other climate change impacts such as droughts and fires.
- Folks highlighted the desire and potential to learn from nature and the beings around us, especially focused on interconnectedness and healing, providing the resources to sustain us, to age in place, to keep the circle connected.
- People emphasized a hope and interest in building stronger intergenerational connections and bridging divides between various political and social perspectives to build stronger relationships across the community.
- Many highlighted their love for the town and sense of community. Folks emphasized the importance of social connections, and want to create connectedness and inclusion by fostering community spaces, such as potlucks, block parties, and a shared commitment to helping neighbors. There was also a desire to continue to nurture that sense of community and intergenerational connections through new housing (e.g., co-housing, walkable neighborhoods).
- Folks emphasized an interest in creating resilience hubs or community centers, connecting and coordinating the resources in town, and making those resources legible and accessible. Ideas for sharing resources include a wood bank!
- There was an interest in pursuing technological solutions for understanding our climate risks, where there are risks, and being proactive about climate action.
- Many people envisioned an Ashfield where transportation is convenient and accessible, and everyone is able to get where they need to go without relying on personal vehicles exclusively. There's a desire for making Ashfield more accessible, walkable, and connected, through public transportation, sidewalks, and clustering housing downtown.

- People also explored and discussed what it takes for collective action – including organizing, dreaming, lifting up ideas, mitigating friction, and being creative in our solutions. Collective action needs relationality, reciprocity, sovereignty; there’s a need for both accountability and grace in getting to responsibility. As a whole, it requires being human with each other, and being in community.

Takeaways and Next Steps -

- Overall, the momentum for action continues to grow, with the group elevating actionable ideas that can move the community from its current challenges and opportunities toward the visions expressed over the course of the Story Circle process. People are eager to try things and get their hands dirty!
- There’s an ongoing need to continue outreach to make sure the project is reaching and engaging as many corners of Ashfield as possible.
 - Action: Ashfield Farmers and Growers, additional local businesses, Snowmobile Association, Rod and Gun Club, Belding Memorial Library, Ashfield Water District, Highway Department, Mohawk Regional High School, Sanderson Academy families, and other young Ashfield residents attending other middle and high schools, among others.
 - Action: Continue to 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.
- There’s ongoing and continued momentum around pursuing housing strategies that can make Ashfield more affordable for current and future residents.
 - 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.
 - Action: Focus on affordable housing strategies, solutions, and potential for partnerships at one of the two upcoming site tours.
- A vision for a Resilience Hub is beginning to emerge.
 - Action: Share Resilience Hubs research back with the community at the final community dinner and other project outreach and engagement channels.
 - Action: Incorporate the dimensions of resilience contained in residents’ visions for the future into the framework for an Ashfield resilience hub.

- There is a desire to collaborate at regional and watershed scales to support ecosystem health and local agriculture.
 - Action: Explore pathways for partnerships and agreements across different viewpoints for how to support ecosystem health, conserve resources like farmland, and work together at a watershed scale to protect against other climate change impacts such as droughts and fires.
- Indigenous involvement and engagement creates new opportunities and connections that are strongly desired by many in the community. Appreciation for Ohketeau's leadership during this community dinner was expressed extensively.

What's next?

The next community dinner will be hosted on April 29th from 6:00 - 8:00pm, location to be confirmed.