

# Ashfield MVP Community Dinner #3

## Summary

### Overview -

On April 29, 2025 from 6:00 - 8:00pm, members of the Ashfield community gathered for a community dinner and discussion at Sanderson Academy. 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 third 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 well as students and their families from Mohawk Trail Regional High School, our local high school serving Ashfield and the surrounding towns. This dinner, in particular, focused on creating a space for students to talk about their visions for the future of Ashfield and the region. In addition to students, invitations were sent out to a wide cross-section of the Ashfield community and flyers were distributed on social media and in public spaces around town. Roughly 50 members of the Ashfield community, including 12 students, joined the community dinner.

Childcare was made available onsite to facilitate participation by parents, guardians, and older siblings.

### **What took place?**

In the weeks leading up to the community dinner, 12 youth from Mohawk Trail Regional School joined the project team as community liaisons. These students led interviews with their peers and other community members (parents, neighbors, teachers, among others) to gather insights and ideas on the following questions:

- *What kind of vision of Ashfield / the Hilltowns do you have that would make you want to keep living here or come back to live here after school?*
- *What do you think we can do in our communities to help make our town(s) resilient to the climate / extreme weather events like storms, droughts, and floods we have seen?*
- *What would you do in your local town government towards balancing the need for farm land and the need for affordable housing? What ideas come to mind?*
- *What else would you like to see to help the future of your town?*

The responses to these interviews were compiled in a [document here](#), and the student liaisons brought their learnings from the interviews to the dinner's discussions. The student liaisons received stipends covered by the grant to recognize and support their time and work on the project.

At the dinner, Larry Spotted Crow Mann of Ohketeau Cultural Center and citizen of the Hassanamisco Nipmuc Tribe welcomed everyone to the dinner with a traditional song and drumming. Adam Bright of Double Edge Theatre provided a brief overview of the project, and how this community dinner continues to build on the conversations from the [first](#) and [second](#) community dinners. Hannah Jarrell of Double Edge Theatre introduced the student liaisons, along with their teacher Rachel Silverman, and recognized them for their work towards this project.

Kim Pevia of Ohketeau Cultural Center then introduced the activity for the evening. Each table had a list of seven criteria that reflect visions for Ashfield and the Hilltowns region that have emerged throughout the process thus far. These included things like protecting farmland while developing more affordable housing, energy solutions, creating a rural resilience hub, improving resilience to extreme weather, and resources for all generations. Each of the seven tables was assigned one topic, and asked to discuss what it would look like if Ashfield and the region could achieve this vision. *What would be one*

*big audacious goal attached to each of these themes? What does it take to maintain over time? To meet the needs of all people in the town?* The student liaisons strategically spread out across the seven tables and were encouraged to lead their table's discussion. Each group discussed their topic, brainstormed ideas and strategies, and then reported out on their thinking to the full group. Conversations continued over a meal of vegetarian lasagne, tossed salad from Atlas Farms, cookies from Williamsburg General Store, and brownies (with gluten-free and dairy free options).

### **Summary of the Discussion -**

- Each table focused on a specific vision for Ashfield, and discussed potential approaches to making progress together.
- Vision #1: Balancing the need for affordable housing with land and farming preservation. Proposed approaches:
  - Retrofitting big houses to convert into multiple units, including more rentals.
  - Potential to seek grants for this purpose, with a need for guidance and support in this process.
  - Revisiting zoning regulations to identify areas most appropriate for competing land uses (e.g. housing vs. farming, land conservation).
  - Focus on increasing density in the center of town to promote walkability, community and neighborly culture.
- Vision #2: Creating and promoting community resources (e.g. access to transportation, food security, employment support). Proposed approaches:
  - Mutual aid and community sharing. Many examples of existing programs and resources, such as Share the Warmth, and the seed bank and tool library at the public library.
  - Advertising of community resources virtually (e.g. website or newsletter) AND physically, e.g. through bulletin boards in high-traffic areas, newspaper. There is a major need for a place to see what's going on in town.
  - A town recreation center would be a huge asset. Current facilities are limited and scattered around town, but could also be better utilized through coordination with community groups.
- Vision #3: Identifying and coordinating needs and partnerships for a community resilience hub. Proposed approaches:
  - Potential for a crisis center - youth and small businesses need to be part of any planning, especially businesses related to essential needs during a crisis, e.g. food, clothing, bedding.

- Support community organizers as the “glue” bringing people together. Community collaboration requires things like childcare and transportation to make it possible for many people to participate.
- Identify grant-writers who can help the community secure resources for this work on an ongoing basis.
- Explore the potential for cross-town liaisons to support working together with other towns in the region.
- Vision #4: Emergency management and recovery. Proposed approaches:
  - Filtration systems so that we have water during droughts.
  - Solar panels, batteries, and generators to help maintain power during outages.
  - Community Emergency Response Team is currently developing strategies for disaster response.
  - House calls to check on folks post-disaster.
  - Community food bank that can distribute food during emergencies.
- Vision #5: Location for a resilience hub and how it could support the community during extreme weather events. Proposed approaches:
  - Identifying the needs of a resilience hub space and assessing existing community spaces based on those needs.
  - Prevention measures to reduce impacts from extreme weather events, e.g. software that would warn people before it floods so that they can evacuate, planting more vegetation in areas prone to flooding to reduce erosion.
- Vision #6: Assessing vulnerabilities across town. Proposed approaches:
  - Enabling robo calls to call cell phones, not just landlines.
  - Recognizing that different areas of Ashfield are prone to different vulnerabilities and planning accordingly.
  - For example, South Ashfield may be more prone to flooding, but less so to fire because it is less wooded than other parts of town.
  - Similarly, some parts of town are cut off during flooding, so it would be helpful to have neighborhood-local places to go, and awareness of specific vulnerable populations as well as emergency resources (e.g. folks who have backup power, extra space, etc.) at a neighborhood level.
- Vision #7: Nature-based solutions to environmental challenges in town. Proposed approaches:
  - Paving high-hazard roads to reduce dangers e.g. icy roads, erosion.
  - Look at where invasive species are coming from, and how they are being managed in their original habitats. What can we learn from this?

## **Takeaways and Next Steps -**

- There is strong community support for continuing this work and diving deeper into many of the solutions that have been suggested.
- From here, the project team will be working to identify specific next steps for action that have emerged over the course of this entire process.
- Participants were invited to sign up to stay involved in the specific issue areas they are interested in. Participants are also encouraged to fill out the follow-up survey from the dinner to highlight specific actions that they are feeling the most momentum behind and would most like to see happen.
- Ashfield Fire Chief, Kyle Walker, committed to working with the MVP team to make a resource list for residents with regard to community emergency procedures.
- A need that was identified was furthering how community members are aware of existing resources in addition to the above – how do we make sure all residents know what exists so that we can collectively build on those resources? Many of these resources were shared with those in the room.

## **What's next?**

- A virtual panel on resilient housing solutions will take place on June 24th. The panel will feature local Ashfield residents who have undertaken projects including ADU conversions, energy efficiency retrofits, renewable energy systems, tiny homes, and other creative housing solutions.