



# Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and Living Culture Project

Municipal Vulnerability  
Project Case Study

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



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**Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and  
Living Culture Project:  
Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Case Study**

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MVP partners**

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# Executive Summary

## Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and Living Culture Project.

What happens when multiple generations of Ashfield residents, guided by a theatre company with a social justice mission, take the time to come together over good food, facilitated conversation, and shared purpose to discuss the community’s needs around clean energy, affordable housing, and nature-based solutions to climate change?

***One Community Resilience Day, Two Site Tours, Three Community Dinners, Twelve Student Liaisons, 72 Interviews, 417 Participants!***

Thanks to a collaborative effort between the Town of Ashfield, Double Edge Theatre and partners, and supported by a generous Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness grant from the Massachusetts Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (hereafter MVP), the community was awarded a unique opportunity to undertake both visioning and information gathering to tackle some of the hardest hitting problems facing the community through the **Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and Living Culture Project.**

***You need a bunch of things to exist before you can make theatre...  
There is no theatre if the town is underwater or on fire. Adam Bright***

The goals were

straightforward: to explore three main themes—Clean Energy, Nature-Based Solutions to Climate Change, and Affordable Housing— in community to understand what the residents



Community Dinner #2, Ashfield, MA. Photo by Double Edge.

think, explore meaningful solutions, and build toward creating rural resilience. To accomplish this, the grant mandated both the creation of meaningful community engagement events and that the Town apply for the MVP grant.

Community leaders recognized that Double Edge Theatre and their close partner Ohketeau Cultural Center have

demonstrated community engagement skills, missions that extend beyond their own walls,

clean energy experience, and each work to uplift their communities— making them excellent partners for the Town. Each organization engages in work known as *civic practice*, working with the community on issues best solved together.

Double Edge recognized that this project would demand significant time and focus, but

after

***“We got a lot of people involved. There are people who want to be involved in civic practice, from young people to old people. It's good that we did that.” Stacy Klein***

consideration, they opted to work in service to the town and take this opportunity to address their common concern of the climate crisis with the community. As Adam Bright, Double Edge Executive Director, noted, “The environmental issues that we're facing as a human race are paramount to us. That's not to say I don't think theatre is a priority for us and it is super important, but you need a bunch of things to exist before you can make theatre. So, for instance, there is no theatre if the town is underwater or on fire. And you also need community, no matter what. So, all those things together make this project and how it was laid out important for us. The other part of what we do, one of our specialties, is that we bring people together to be able to converse, to argue, to discuss, to problem solve, and we do that in ways that are not necessarily how a municipality would do that.”

**We were able to bring a group as diverse as Ashfield can offer across demographics into these critical conversations in a way in which voices were heard and supported. Justin Wellman**

The

requirement to gather and hear from community members was critically important to the grant, and multiple events were created to enable gathering, outlined below, as important were the outreach efforts to bring in as many voices as possible across town and across divides of age, race, gender, political persuasion, and income to share what each believed was best for the Town of Ashfield, their neighbors, their families, and themselves. Double Edge staff invested considerable amounts of time on outreach efforts, often meeting one-on-one to obtain as much input as possible. This effort helped to fuel fresh ideas and engage people who may not otherwise had elected to participate.

## Community Events

The **Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and Living Culture Project** partners determined that a variety of gathering opportunities would offer the widest potential to obtain input from the community on issues related to the three themes of clean energy, nature-based solutions and affordable housing. A mix of Site Tours with one each dedicated to clean energy and affordable housing, Community Dinners, and the creation of Student Liaisons

which engaged middle and high school students and an instructor from Mohawk Trail Regional School. Each project drew different audiences with different focus and equally varied learning and outcomes. Double Edge catered each of the snacks, dinners and lunch. Each event was recorded, and the Community Dinners were livestreamed and open to the public. Recaps of each event was produced, and they have been posted on the Town of Ashfield's website. See the Appendix for a list of recordings and URLs.

### **Community Dinners and Student Community Liaisons**

Three Community Dinners were created to provide a facilitated space in which Ashfield residents could come together, have discussions, ask questions, and question assumptions. Each of the Dinners produced opportunities for Action Steps which the Town of Ashfield can utilize for future projects, such as MVP 2.0, and this document can be utilized to create a Resilient Ashfield.

Community Dinners were held in three different locations (Double Edge, Ashfield Community Hall, and Sanderson Academy) to offer community building and introduce people to settings that balance new with familiar. Reimbursement for childcare was made available for parents and other caregivers to facilitate attendance, and onsite childcare was available at the final dinner.

Student Community Liaisons were able to highlight their semester-long project and serve as table moderators at the Community Dinner #3. Their work exploring a resilient future for Ashfield included 72 surveys which served as the key areas for table conversations, adding to the depth and richness of their work. Their story can be found in detail in the Case Study and in Key Findings #4.



#### **Community Dinner #1**

Held on Thursday, December 5, 2024, from 5:30 - 7:30 pm, at the Double Edge Theatre pavilion, this event was attended by approximately thirty people who gathered for conversation and dinner.

**The goal of the project and this dinner was to address the question: *What does climate resilience look like for Ashfield?***

Adam Bright capturing participant ideas. Photo by Double Edge.

Double Edge Theatre welcomed everyone to the dinner, started with a land acknowledgement provided the context for the project, and the spirit of gathering in community was shared. The conversation circled the room, as everyone

introduced themselves and their favorite place in Ashfield. The conversation expanded to sharing stories, concerns, and ideas related to the prompt: ***What makes your daily life in Ashfield more challenging? What makes it easier to navigate the challenges?***

Among the challenges included: 1. The difficulty of farming in this era of climate change, and increasingly, too much rain and flooding. 2. Lack of access to public transportation. 3. Affordable Housing challenges were shared, including both affordable housing and unexpected sharing by those who noted that they had too much housing. Several of the participants shared that they lived in the same homes where they had raised their families, but they were now either single people or a couple living in homes built for large families. This event set a warm tone and set the stage for the balance of events, as moderator Adam Bright and all Double Edge staff worked to make attendees feel comfortable and heard, while the dinner and desserts made this winter weeknight special and feel unhurried. For more details, see the recap.

## Community Dinner #2



Adam Bright capturing participant contributions at Community Dinner #2. Photo by Double Edge.

Community Dinner #2 was held at the Ashfield Community Hall on January 30<sup>th</sup> 2025. This event started with refreshments and a chance to mingle before getting underway.

Ohketeau Director, Larry Spotted Crow Mann, 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. The night was facilitated by members of Double Edge Theatre and Kim Pevia, consultant to Ohketeau.

After a round of introductions, Kim Pevia explained the structure of a Story Circle a way to ensure stories are heard and that everyone has a chance to share. The room broke into a collection of circles in groups of four. Each person was invited to tell a story about their **vision for the future of Ashfield.**

Similar key themes that emerged echoed such as affordable housing, more public transportation, celebrating farms from Community Dinner #1, but emphasized an interest in:

- Making the town welcoming and accessible to residents of all different backgrounds creating resilience hubs community centers,
- Pursuing technological solutions for understanding our climate risks, where there are risks, and being proactive about climate action;
- Ashfield being more accessible, walkable, and connected, through public transportation, sidewalks, and clustering housing downtown; exploring collective action – including organizing, dreaming, mitigating friction, and being creative in finding solutions.
- Learning from nature and the beings around us.
- Expanding Indigenous involvement and engagement, creating new opportunities and connections in the community.



Ashfield resident sharing a point at the Community Dinner #2. Photo by Double Edge.

In addition, there was much appreciation for Ohketeau's leadership during this community dinner. For more details, see the recap in the Case Study.

### Community Dinner #3

The final dinner, was held at Sanderson Academy, on April 29, 2025, with 50 people in attendance. The event was facilitated by Kim Pevia. Each individual table was moderated by Student Community Liaisons, middle and high school students from Mohawk Trail Regional School.

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 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 was asked to discuss what it would look like if Ashfield and the region could achieve this vision.



### **Student Community Liaisons: Youth Leadership and Survey work**

The 12 middle and high school Student Community Liaisons met with their instructor Rachel Silverman and MVP team members Hannah Jarrell, Dylan Young and Kim Pevia at Mohawk Trail Regional School for a semester to deepen their exploration of what it means to be an Ashfield resident tackling important challenges. The Student Community Liaison work was deemed a resounding success by parents, Town leaders and the MVP team. As Hannah

Jarrell noted, the grant provided the youth with a small stipend, making this work an opportunity to not only get student insights, but offered some paid work for the students.

The liaisons students each conducted six interviews with community members (including peers, parents, neighbors, teachers, and 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 to balance the need for farmland 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 Liaisons reported out some of their survey findings at the Community Dinner #3 which was built around their efforts each of the dinner tables (seven in total) was assigned one of the questions that the students asked in their surveys, creating the opportunity for more community participation and for students to lead. See more about the Student Community Liaisons in Key Findings #4.

***A total of 417 people, or 25% of the total population, participated in the gatherings and took part in one-on-one conversations.***

### Community Resilience Day

The Community Resilience Day offered an opportunity for community members to learn more about the MVP project in a flexible and less formal setting than a community dinner. Individuals who may have been unable to attend a weeknight event at a set time could drop by Double Edge, engage in a fun activity, such as fly on a bungee, play musical instruments, and have a conversation about rural resilience. For families with children, the activities gave parents the chance to view available materials and have a conversation in a small group setting. Some people who may never have heard of the MVP project before had the opportunity to be introduced for the first time, join the mailing list to be invited to future events, and bring home materials about the project goals, and work done to date. This event provided another opportunity for community members to explore what it means to create a resilient community.



Discussing the MVP grant during the Community Resilience Day. Photo by Double Edge.

### Site Tours

Two Site Tours were developed to address two of the key issues of affordable housing and clean energy. Site Tour #1 was an opportunity for primarily municipal leaders and committee members from Ashfield and the region, those most responsible for making projects come to fruition, to share possibilities and provide updates on projects currently in progress or under consideration. The concept for Site Tour #2 evolved over the course of the project from more of an open house for residents to visit homes changed to a more

intimate opportunity for sharing, with the end result of creating a resource for current and future residents to learn from those who have already built energy efficient, or small to tiny homes.

### Site Tour #1

Site Tour #1 offered the opportunity to focus on municipal clean energy. The day began with State Representative Natalie Blais (Franklin 1<sup>st</sup> District) welcoming the participants, and the Ashfield Energy Committee sharing their concepts and potential for adding solar in Ashfield. The three sites selected showcased possible locations for new solar power, while one site also offered geothermal potential. The sites were the Ashfield Municipal Garage, Sanderson Academy, and a field located behind the Wastewater Treatment Plant. Each site had great potential for solar, and Sanderson Academy also offers ample space for geothermal.

Site Tour #1 was followed by discussion over lunch at Double Edge. Among the participants were members of energy committees from nearby towns, who were invited to learn from

***The Double Edge Theatre (DET) MVP grant was helpful for the Energy Committee in that it engaged more people in thinking and talking about the future in Ashfield and what we want for our town as relates to the impacts of climate change.***  
**Alexandra Osterman**

the tour and discuss possible collaboration opportunities. Of particular note was concern that Sanderson Academy, the local elementary school serving Ashfield and Plainfield is at risk of closure. The elementary school sits in a district where there is a notable decline in population, and the District is preparing to make hard decisions that could affect this facility. While there was clearly voiced concern and opposition to such a closure, if this occurred, the Town would likely move its Town Offices there, and would consider the potential for Senior Housing. All options would still benefit from clean energy.

### Site Tour #2

Site Tour #2 was held on June 25, 2025, at Double Edge Theatre's Meeting Room, where twelve people, including seven featured guests who were sought after and selected because of their experiences with unique homes and building and real estate expertise, gathered for an intimate conversation in Double Edge Theatre's Meeting Room. Featured guests shared the evolution stories of their own unique and energy efficient homes, , which

ranged from a tiny house to a house designed to enable its residents to age in place, discussed both energy efficiency and what defines “affordable” housing, and shared dinner and conversation. A retired real estate agent also shared the evolution of the cost of land and homes in the region and a contractor shared her 30 years of experience renovating or building new and energy-efficient homes in town.

An important goal for this Site Tour was to have the opportunity to hear how varied homes in Ashfield were constructed and how they incorporated clean energy or energy efficiency practices. For those who felt comfortable, one request was to share the cost of land and construction, opportunities or barriers, such as bank or mortgage restrictions, and how these may have affected decision-making. Several shared the architectural plans and photos of the completed homes. Upon reflection, Bright and the MVP team are envisioning a document to help current and future Ashfield residents understand the variety of options and opportunities others have undertaken, but also what is possible due to new zoning, innovative ideas, as well as potential issues that could affect new homes or home renovation.

See Key Findings #3 for more on what was learned from this Site Visit and how this information helped inform the Action steps.

## Key Findings

Many of the Key Findings from the conversations overlapped among the three areas to be explored, and several revealed important dependencies, vulnerabilities, and opportunities. For example, the lack of public transportation (shared in Student interviews and Community Dinner #3) made it hard for families to access grocery stores. Quality local farm products can be found at the Ashfield Farmers Market. Farm viability requires community support and purchase of products, yet producing those products is being negatively impacted by climate change. At the first community dinner, farmers illustrated how much harder growing food has become thanks to problems induced by climate change. For example, invasive species are overtaking the wild concord (fox) grape vines which had been plentiful for generations. The vines that remain have not produced well, if at all, in recent years, making affordable products harder for families to purchase. This type of awareness of regional interconnectedness underscores the importance of working together and using nature-based solutions to solve regional problems.

## **Key Findings #1- Continue the Work, Continue Gathering**

One of the first questions raised during the Site Gathering #1 was *How to keep getting minds in the room to continue visioning and finding creative pathways to sustainability and resilience for everyone?*

The answer was clear as one of the most uplifting findings from **Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and Living Culture Project** was the enthusiasm for participating in the Community Dinners and Student Community Liaison work, and the stated desire for this to continue. People want more opportunities to gather and continue to share time together working collaboratively toward solutions. They also want some degree of agency to help and have their ideas acted upon.

Collaborations such as the **Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and Living Culture Project** offer a roadmap for involving residents and embracing local nonprofits and regional partners to share in creating resiliency and solving some of the challenges the community faces. The culmination of this project has been clarifying needs and actions identified by the community.

**Actions:** Continue to Gather.

- Create volunteer-run committees, including Youth-led (see Key Findings #4) to provide the leadership to hold future gatherings.
- Empower Leadership with clear goals.
- Design ad hoc committees with short term goals, clear deadlines, and opportunities to join another project. Ad hoc committees could support planning the next Community Gathering, Potluck Dinner, or Visioning session.

**Actions:** Remove Barriers for ongoing participation –

- Structure meetings and work to fit the lives of busy people. Aim to meet at mutually convenient times and in locations that could accommodate children,
- Seek stipend grant funds to engage future low-income Resilient Ashfield participants who otherwise need to be at work.
- See Key Findings #4 regarding Student Committees.

**Actions:** Visioning Sessions –

- Create a Resource Day to gather and prioritize the MVP findings and visioning action steps created during the MVP process See pages Community Dinner #3, and which can be found in this document.
- Share the prioritized list with the Town as a basis for what Ashfield Residents want.
- Seek funding for ongoing people-powered leadership to support an overstretched municipal government.
- Prioritize ideas that will cost little to nothing so there is at least one ‘win’ that can keep up the momentum.

### **Key Findings #2– Amplify What Already Exists**

One resounding theme that emerged during Community Dinner #3 was the significant and sincere discussion about ways to support neighbors during times of crisis, such as during severe storms or prolonged power outages. Several of the stated needs were met with ideas, such as creating a buddy system to check on elders or isolated neighbors or creating a wood bank for those who heat their homes with wood. Many of these programs already exist in the Town of Ashfield, but were unknown to participants, and therefore are unknown to other Ashfield residents. The need to inform residents of programs, opportunities, or places to find information is paramount. Information about this MVP grant, and all documents can be found on the Town of Ashfield website at:

<https://www.ashfield.org/2436/MVP>.

#### **Actions:**

- Create a comprehensive pamphlet or PDF guide of current programs that exist in Town.
- Make this document known and available to all residents in the format they need. To raise awareness, advertise the document across a variety of channels, including flyers sent home with Sanderson students, notices sent out with tax bills, and displays on noticeboards such as at the post office or Elmer’s store.
- Consider printing a QR code on refrigerator magnets or stickers with the website address and make it possible for those who need a printed copy to get one at an accessible location, such as the library, stores, or Town Hall.
- Create and share opportunities to volunteer or to participate by receiving services in the programs when needed.

- Fund this as creatively as possible. Seek a grant to pay for design and outreach. Make the awareness campaign fun and participatory, such as accepting photos of Ashfield sites and/or voting for the cover.
- Consider involving Ashfield Student Committee to research programs, support the design of the document &/or the cover and help spread the word that such a document exists.
- Add all service programs, Town, nonprofit and church run.

### **Key Findings #3 – Affordable Housing and Energy Efficient Homes**

The need for more affordable and more energy efficient housing is at crisis levels in many parts of the country and according to participating residents, the same is true in Ashfield. Shared throughout this project by participants was the impacts that the lack of affordable housing is having on themselves and their families, and the deep desire to protect Ashfield’s unique rural landscape and farmland.

What has emerged was a shift in thinking and personal desires. Residents are willing to give up the idea of owning a large house on a large lot, emblematic of American prosperity and independence, preferring smaller, affordable, clustered near others in the downtown. This selflessness supports their stated desires for connection, an active role in protecting open space and farmland, and doing their part to protect the planet. Interestingly, these small shifts offered huge benefits in areas like public transportation, supporting local businesses, creating more vibrancy, and increasing community connectivity.

**Action:** Share information with low-to-moderate income homeowners of upcoming opportunities including grants, and energy conservation programs such as those offered by Community Action, as well as any state programs that may become available to support renovations that could divide a home into multiple units.

**Action:** Host an information sharing event so residents can learn about programs such as those funded by Mass Clean Energy Center that purchase dilapidated buildings, renovate and sell them to low-income residents, and Habitat for Humanity which engages community members to help construct homes with and for their eligible neighbors.

**Action:** Invite Community Action, which runs energy efficiency programs in Franklin County to inform low-income tenants and landlords about their programs.

**Action:** Create a living document which current and future Ashfield residents can access and add to that describe the types of energy efficient and affordable dwellings that have been created in town. This will include details on construction costs, tips to make

efficiency easier to implement, how to access clean energy guidance, such as siting for best solar gain, stories from people who built unique homes and want to share ideas, and more.

**Action:** Revisit findings in this report from Site Visit #2 and Community Dinner #3 for visioning ideas and action items.

#### **Key Findings #4 – Student Community Liaisons and Youth Leadership**

The Student Liaison work completed by students at Mohawk Trail Regional School was considered by many to be the strongest part of this project. The hope for the project was to obtain multi-generational participation but having the Student Community Liaisons lead on that work exceeded expectations. This project created the opportunity to engage students, pay them for their participation, and obtain their input and ideas on the issues that will directly affect their futures and the future of Ashfield. The students also obtained or honed important leadership skills as they conducted interviews with those with whom they knew or were comfortable and led the discussion during Community Dinner #3 and were often seated at tables with people they were meeting for the first time. As Town Administrator Paul McLatchy noted, the students will be most affected by climate change, “So, I think they understand that they have an investment in this. The truth is, and I don't mean to sound cliché, but they are the future. They are tomorrow. They are the future Select Board members, the Finance Committee, the Planning board members, they are the community organization, they are the directors of Double Edge Theatre. They are the people who are going to be taking over in the future.”

**Action:** Put out a call for volunteer community residents to support a Student Committee. Volunteers can:

- Meet with youth and help guide them to do their own work.
- Co-write LCC grants for event funds.
- Be CORI and SORI vetted by police department or staff at Sanderson or Mohawk schools to ensure safety.

**Action:** Put out a call for Youth to serve on their own committee with support from adult volunteers. The committee could provide the students with a multitude of skills, pride, and agency to solve the issue of nothing to do.

- Generate ideas for their own event(s), such as a dance, a Poetry slam, a weekly coffee house, drawing/art making time, etc.
- Co-write LCC grants for event funds.

- Plan, market, and execute event(s) that suits their interests.
- Ask the Town to provide a safe, free space for the project(s).

**Action:** To keep the momentum, especially for those students who have expressed their interest in creating change, recreate the Student Liaison Committee at the Town Administration level. This would serve multiple purposes, including teaching students about town governance and how to serve on a committee, how to present a variety of opinions and how to create action and direct the changes they want to see. While a youth committee is not new to Ashfield, this new group of students appears to be ready for the challenge.

**Action:** Seek grants to support the Student Liaison Committee and Jarrell's time to continue to work with the Youth at Mohawk Trail Regional School. Connect with the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts for ideas.

### **Key Findings #5 – Expand Nature-Based solution work**

Finding nature-based solutions was the one area explored in the grant that was most complicated and broadly sweeping. Grant partners felt that this work required more time and that the least progress was seen. What emerged, however, were meaningful action steps.

**Action:** Enhance zoning to protect farmland from development, retain forests and the look and feel of the rural community.

**Action:** Protect the floodplains to mitigate further damage to town roads and infrastructure.

**Action:** Use MVP 2.0 to develop a plan for protecting the region's watershed and floodplain.

**Action:** Work in collaboration with Ohketeau and Conway School of Landscape Design on ways to further nature-based solutions for the region.

### **Conclusion**

The **Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and Living Culture Project** aimed to seek innovative ideas and understand what would make a resilient Ashfield. Participants showed their willingness to consider new approaches to transforming clean energy, nature-based solutions and affordable housing. Affordable housing discussions illustrated this

point well: Typical Ashfield homes were built to accommodate larger families and required larger lots. Participants emphasized that smaller homes on smaller sized lots, clustered together, preferably downtown, was more appealing than a large, financially out-of-reach home. This kind of innovative thinking could solve multiple problems at the same time. Smaller homes would be less costly to heat/cool and maintain, there would be no loss of the open space or farmland regarded as vital to maintaining the rural character of Ashfield, more walkability would reduce reliance on personal transportation, and closer neighbors meant more opportunities for vibrancy and gathering. This fresh thinking rang throughout the Community Dinners and Site Tours.

***Ashfield is already doing a whole lot of things right.”***

***Kim Pevia***

Continuing to be nimble and responsive to change and external unpredictability and thinking and acting collaboratively with the best in mind for all of the community will serve Ashfield well. The current loss of federal funds may require Ashfield to prioritize projects that either cost little or can be created or built by the community themselves. The community will have to prioritize which resiliency ideas will not only best serve their collective needs but will produce the greatest impacts and long-term cost savings.

Kim Pevia summed up the Ashfield Rural Climate Resilience and Living Culture Project best, *“(This project) gave me hope that Ashfield will figure out a way to maintain the charm that it has, that there will be a new generation of folks to push it further into what it can be: to be more socially just, more environmentally aware, more housing conscious. And just continue to do more and more of what they are already doing, because Ashfield is already doing a whole lot of things right.”*