

Minding the Gap: Finding and Filling Community Needs through Coalition-Building¹

A Case Study of the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition

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It felt like being on the business end of a heavyweight champion's powerful left swing, and then experiencing almost immediately the devastating right hook that followed. The damage seemed deadly. Few can recover from a one-two punch like this.

The residents of North Adams, Massachusetts felt the sociological and economic equivalent of this trauma starting in 1968. It was then they realized the urban renewal project that gutted most of its historic Victorian commercial district and downtown landmark-quality residential houses would be replaced with... nothing. Stunned by the reality that no new retail development would occupy the now barren landscapes, the right hook was on its way and nobody saw it coming. Sprague Electric, the city's economic engine that supported nearly 5000 jobs, abandoned its expansive twenty-eight building complex just two blocks from Main Street. Every job they provided had now vanished.

This is a story not unfamiliar to many older, small Northeastern cities. Talk up the promise of urban renewal, tear down the history told in the physical structures that created a sense of "place," wait for new development, then realize it's little more than a chimera. And as a community begins to realize that the talk of redevelopment was based on little more than hope and politics, the community then watches its anchor industrial employer simply disappear.

Like most of these places, North Adams had no vision. They thought that Sprague Electric would always be there. They thought everyone would want to shop downtown. They thought new and bigger would be better. But by the time the wrecking ball of urban renewal created a raw empty cavity in the center of what was a bucolic and bustling downtown, Sprague was already half-way gone and strip malls sprouted on the geographic fringes. Like others, they never imagined their primary employer could leave or that urban renewal could be filled with such empty promises. They never planned.

But the other story of North Adams – this story – is not one of urban planning run amok or policy analysts with their heads in the sand. The story of North Adams' will to reclaim itself is best told by shining the spotlight on one community-based organization; how it became established, how it grew organically to address the city's emerging social needs, and how it sustained its guided growth.

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Turning Out the Lights

Berkshire is the western-most county in Massachusetts, with the spine of the Berkshire Hills running through the center from its boundary with Connecticut to the south, up to Vermont, where the hills merge into the Green Mountains. To the west, on a straight north-south border, the county hugs New York State. Crossing into the county on a major highway from any of the three neighboring states one now sees the same, proud sign proclaiming "The Berkshires: America's Premier Cultural Resort." And this can generally sum-up the perception that much of America has of Berkshire County.

Since the mid-1800's, when industrial titans built their massive Berkshire "cottages" to live extravagantly during the summers in the cooler, beautiful surroundings, the Berkshires have been associated increasingly with wealth. It is the summer home of the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood, a number of theatre and dance performance companies, art museums and colleges. Pittsfield, the county seat and located in the geographical center, always had a mixed industrial economic base that was anchored, until the 1960's, by General Electric. Williamstown, on the northern border, is home to Williams College and the Clark Art Institute. It is a beautiful town rich in cultural resources, intellectual heft, and average per capita income.

Just to Williamstown's east lies North Adams and, while they share a common border, they are a study in contrasts, having very little else in common with each other. While Williamstown always enjoyed relative prosperity, the social fabric of its neighbor was based on factory workers and the retailers who served them.

Since the 1960's, North Adams' social fabric began deteriorating rapidly. Businesses that had previously provided jobs for generations of families were terminating operations in the area at a frightening rate, and the consequences were devastating. As factory jobs - as well as the jobs in industries supporting these factories - disappeared rapidly, many families moved, leaving a vulnerable population of former factory workers. Home owners sold and left the area, and real estate was either abandoned or acquired by investors who squeezed out any remaining revenue in the old, pre-War residential and commercial structures without reinvestment. Once-beautiful neighborhoods now became unkempt and open to drugs and the consequences of poverty.

A depressing atmosphere seeped into the area. One national magazine labeled North Adams "a poor excuse for a city." The Commonwealth of Massachusetts formally acknowledged its disproportionately high percentage of teen pregnancies and level of child abuse. And the bumper sticker of choice on local autos confirmed the depressed state of the community: "If you are the last one to leave North Adams, please turn out the lights."

A Breath of Hope...Momentarily

These were extraordinarily difficult economic times for the region. Its economic engine had sputtered to a halt and the specter for the unemployed of hunger, homelessness and no healthcare became all too real. Luck and timing is part of the area's history. The empty Sprague buildings were "discovered" by faculty at Williams College who envisioned them transformed into a massive complex to house some of the world's largest displays of contemporary art. At first an absolutely audacious plan on paper, it actually began taking form as persistent local political leaders secured funding for planning and formal feasibility studies. Developing the huge Sprague complex into a world-class contemporary arts center and local business incubator was becoming a reality. A private/public partnership developed and with enormous support from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, MASS MoCA was born. Venture capitalists were also attracted to the promise of many new enterprises that wanted to call the MoCA complex their home.

With MoCA finally launched in 1999, an up-tick in the quality of life in this relatively rural region was palpable. Significant affordable office space was created, and a surprising number of Williams graduates wanted to stay in the area to launch new internet companies at the MoCA complex. Venture capital to start these firms was surprisingly accessible. While the region was off the radar screen for many of the New York and Silicon Valley venture capitalists, the influential Williams alumni network helped to weld those connections. New residents began to move into North Adams. Decent housing stock in North Adams remained and it was affordable. Crime was one of the few social maladies of the time that did not increase significantly.

But it was *new* families who were getting the new jobs created. They had their own transportation and were able to afford what they needed for a wholesome quality of life. Few former factory workers were hired during this economic spurt for the region. What developed was a new culture of artists, high tech workers, and internet-savvy residents.

These new local jobs paid good money. Social concerns of the "other" resident base became lost as economic prospects dulled the senses, preventing the new entrants from appreciating the still-unraveling social fabric of many longer-term residents. The general perception that a better life for the region was just around the corner was shared by all – except the chronically under- and unemployed factory workers. Somewhat aggravating the situation was the pressure from these new jobs and new families to drive up then-moderate real estate prices just enough to have an impact on families continuing to struggle.

But this breath of hope was not sustainable. While MoCA continued to develop its exhibit space incrementally, many of the corporate start-ups began to fizzle along with the general economy in 2000. With the new millennium, many in this economically fragile area of Northern Berkshire were beginning to feel like they were sliding backwards. While Mass MoCA continues to develop and build-out its exhibition space, only very recently has it advanced significantly in drawing new businesses to the complex as either incubated start-ups or as established firms moving from other areas.

A Coalition Identifies Gaps in the Community

While autos still sported the bumper sticker advising the last person to turn out the lights, some bright lights remained shining even before MASS MoCA became a viable proposition. Among the community's greatest assets was a dedicated human service sector with professionals who cared deeply about the people in North Adams as well as those in neighboring small communities affected by the loss of jobs. This commitment led to a forum to discuss what they were seeing and to determine how they could work together and address pressing social concerns.

Starting in 1985, individuals representing these organizations realized that collaboration - rather than competition - was the only way to help families. A vision began to emerge among those few activists: Families could not only survive in the post-Sprague environment, but they could flourish. Over time, it became essential to involve local residents and representatives from institutions (schools, colleges, churches, health care facilities, social service agencies, banks and other businesses) in the mix. This informal band of committed individuals, representing key stakeholder organizations, eventually became a formal Community Coalition.

The partnership evolved into a formal organization that is entering its eighteenth year. While it has transformed over that time in many ways, it nonetheless remains a “quiet” yet simultaneously powerful force for change in the North Adams area. For the first seven years, it was specifically a health and human services coalition, and their name, the Northern Berkshire Health and Human Services Coalition, aptly described the boundaries of their services. But the broader needs of local neighborhoods served as a catalyst to reconsider its vision and membership. If, in fact, a coalition was to make lasting community change, residents needed to be engaged in that change. One thing became obvious to the Coalition’s founder, Al Bashevkin: to become a more encompassing “Community Coalition,” one that would transcend health and human service issues, they needed to invite *residents* to become *active participants* in their work.

For their first thirteen years they were formally linked to the University of Massachusetts Medical School as an Area Health Education Center (AHEC) program. While their governance structure emphasized a wide level of community participation, it precluded them from taking further action on decisions that community members reached consensus on. In 1998, the steering committee for what would ultimately become the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition (nbCC) voted to sever its relationship with the AHEC program and formally incorporate as a thoroughly independent, local not-for-profit organization. This decision was made after much thought and deliberation and reflected the desire of nbCC to be a master of its own destiny, to pursue a more far-reaching vision. A board of directors now has responsibility for nbCC, Inc. and their budget has seen a 52% increase since the decision to incorporate. While their success at fundraising is worthy to note, far more significant is the decision for the Northern Berkshire community to take responsibility for the success and disappointments of an organization it truly sees as its own, the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition.

How does an independent organization create such commitment from the community it is trying to serve? nbCC is unique in its broad-based and diverse approach to local issues. Its impact on the wider community is clearly the result of a coalition-oriented process they

create and maintain to fully engage a wide cross-section of the community. Whether it is neighbors talking in their neighborhoods about issues that impact them, youth from competing communities working on a public arts project to help express ideas, or community agencies working together in a monthly Coalition Forum to address a pressing social issue, these public gatherings and their resultant programs would not have occurred if the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition had not existed to initiate them.

How Process Becomes the Product

nbCC's governance process, while seemingly cumbersome in its emphasis on extraordinary levels of participation and coalition-building, is actually the keystone to its strength. For the people behind nbCC, their *process* is their "product," since they avoid the role of providing direct services. The distinctive competency they offer the community is their ability to bring diverse groups together, facilitate meaningful conversations that evoke a common set of needs, and help representatives of these groups arrive at solutions that can address their needs. While nbCC finds funding and directly manages a small number of programs in the community, it tries its best to stay out of delivering on the actual solutions they help others define.

Their success at facilitating the continuum of activities - from assessing needs and finding gaps, to identification of viable solutions - is based entirely on the community infrastructure they have created and nurture.

The centerpiece of this process is a monthly forum, hosted by nbCC, that attracts an average of sixty individuals representing both agencies that provide services as well as residents on the receiving end. These well-facilitated meetings promote community dialogue and present a safe public space for the exploration of a variety of community issues that informs, directs and supports most 'downstream' initiatives.

nbCC embraces a notion they fondly refer to as "The Big Picture," which emerges during these now-infamous monthly forums. Like a representative town government (without the formal decision making process), all contributing groups and individuals have equal access. This is the time when the Coalition gets its most representative attendance, and when the interaction across groups about specific topics is at its greatest. The first hour of these meetings is set aside for items that are off-agenda: announcements, comments on issues of the day, introductions of new individuals attending, and networking. The second hour is devoted to a specific topic. Scanning the participants at a monthly meeting, one can see representatives from the geographic area served by the nbCC, and a fairly wide representation of the social classes of this region.

Everyone sits in a circle (and one can imagine how hard it is to have a circle with up to 90 people) and talks by first introducing themselves. Then, Al Bashevkin masterfully facilitates this group to give each an opportunity to have "air time." They honor the community residents who are there because they recognize citizen concern for their community.

For the time in those circles, they are equals, sharing a common hope for a better community. Respect and trust for each other are basic tenets that underscore each meeting's process. Predictability has also been important: the format has been the same for more than ten years. What is truly inspiring is that people keep coming, and perhaps that is an important metric of success of these gatherings.

From month to month, the Big Picture becomes richer in detail and the Coalition's understanding of the community's needs and resources takes shape as an outcome of the process of these meetings. They are structured and facilitated specifically to foster inclusive discussion.

When they have special guests, Al and his colleagues work to remind them of the process, and let them know that usurping a disproportionate amount of air time does not generally work well. Rather, their facilitation stresses the involvement of many group members in broader discussions. In 2003, U.S. Congressman John Olver and State Representative Dan Bosley each were guests at monthly nbCC meetings, and they were able to honor the Coalition process.

Both the formal agenda items presented and the opportunities for informal networking make the Coalition monthly meetings an important forum for the community. One cannot underestimate the impact they have had for creating “public space” in their community.

Drilling Down on the Issues

Each year in September, the forum’s agenda starts as a public hearing about community issues. Based on the discussion from that public hearing, the Coalition then tailors its monthly meetings to address workable topic-issues that have been presented at the September hearing. Service providers, consumers, public officials, local faith-based organizations, and others are involved in this discussion.

nbCC’s sound relationship with local neighborhoods, youth, and service providers makes it relatively easy for them to reach out to experts when they are addressing social issues. But their definition of “expert” includes both those who have professional or academic experience as well as those who are “living the issue.” Because of their location, nbCC leverages the resources of faculty and staff from two excellent higher educational facilities; the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and Williams College. nbCC has worked to bring them into the fold and, in turn, the schools have added a respected academic component to the service providers who often lead the community in identifying social issues.

Partnerships formed by the nbCC to examine issues that arise from the forums are successful in large part because of support from the local community. And this support makes them, in turn, accountable to the community. Clearly, other organizations like nbCC have sprung up in the Berkshires, and across the Commonwealth, with great fanfare - only to collapse under the weight of a community that lacked faith in one or more of their organizational processes. If nbCC lost their local support from a poor decision making process, lack of trust, competing visions within the organization, or dysfunctional politics within the community, they would not have lasted this long.

Walking the Fine Line

Part of the “magic” that makes nbCC so effective is the delicate dance they perform in their role as a community organizer. On the one hand, they take a stand to emphasize the importance of a specific socioeconomic gap that may exist in the community, whether it’s related to healthcare, transportation, homelessness or youth. But their position is to serve as a rallying point for the community to mobilize and – through consensus – determine the best course of action. They manage to continually stay dancing without stepping on their partners’ toes.

For example, the Mayor of North Adams (who is going into his 20th year in office and won his 10th term unopposed as this case goes to press) reads their newsletter with interest to

ensure that they are in alignment with his own vision. While the mayor has been perceived at times to react to other groups as being “for me or against me,” Northern Berkshire Community Coalition has managed to stay in a unique neutral zone.

In small semi-rural cities, organizations are indeed accountable to their community. If their trust is broken, then the word on the street will quickly lead to their demise. People would give up and no longer participate. Their governance structure keeps people invested and participating.

Finding and Filling a Gap: The Coalition Process in Action

In spite of the national perception that Berkshire County is a rather sophisticated, culturally-rich location, absent the problems of other non-urban areas, the Northern Berkshire region is actually a rural region with many of the attendant problems of any rural area. It lacks effective public transportation. The roads are wonderful for tourists and residents who own a car, but without one, getting around the community can be a significant burden. There are over hundreds of miles of roads in Northern Berkshire county and the buses cover only a minute fraction of them. One study of the nbCC's region determined that over 15% of local households lacked cars, putting many families at a disadvantage for the demands of employability.

The Berkshire Regional Transit Authority (BRTA), the local transportation authority, has fixed bus routes available on main roads during business hours, but these routes serve a limited population. If people live off the bus routes, need to travel farther distances or during off-hours, then they will have great difficulty making the bus system work for them.

Conversations begun in 1995 throughout the Coalition community addressed the inadequate transportation system. nbCC completed a formal study of transportation resources in 1966. And, in 1998, an advocate and support person for teen parents had an extensive conversation with Bashevkin about how difficult it was for her to get her teens employed without a means of getting them to an employer. During the same period, Coalition meetings with youth continued to revisit the topic of how difficult it was for them to get places. Without drivers' licenses, young people cannot drive (even if their family has a car) and, without that ability, it was difficult to travel outside the limited and rigid timetable of BRTA.

But the transportation problem was certainly not limited to teens' frustration with travel. Of greater impact was the effect this had on the auto-less underemployed who could not commute to low-wage jobs or those who lost jobs because they lost their transportation option.

The Coalition heard about how difficult it was for people to make appointments with physicians if they lacked a car. The limited system for helping people get to places was at best fragmented, inefficient, and scattered. Some agencies received funding to buy their own vehicles to transport clients, others depended on inefficient dial-a-ride systems, while most of those impacted simply had no means. Many organizations addressed transportation issues on their own, but with little collaboration. The system was utterly confusing to most local residents in need.

During a monthly meeting of the nbCC in February, 1999, the issue of wages necessary for self-sufficiency was the front-and-center topic for discussion. But, more importantly, the facilitated conversation covered the *barriers* that prevented many from reaching a level of economic self sufficiency. Child care, health care, a basic level of both technological and reading literacy, and transportation were all required if affected residents were to get and hold onto a job. While the discussion addressed other, more deep rooted factors, these primary issues were seen as a starting point for further discussions. Following the meeting, nbCC's Board of Directors chose to dedicate a monthly meeting to discuss each of these

specific issues and to examine more closely how strengthening the local transportation system specifically could be an initial step in addressing family economic self-sufficiency.

In May, 2000, US Congressman John Olver scheduled his annual visit to a Coalition monthly meeting. The nbCC Board, on advice from Al Bashevkin, decided to approach Congressman Olver directly on the inadequate transportation system. A small task force of agency employees and some residents met twice to talk about how the issue impacted people's lives and to consider how this might be presented to Congressman Olver. Kathy Keeser, nbCC's Program Director, along with Northern Berkshire Neighbors (a subsidiary effort of nbCC that Keeser manages), met with neighborhood residents and invited them to participate in this discussion with the Congressman. The Congressman (who coincidentally sits on the Transportation Subcommittee for House Appropriations) was informed of the agenda for this upcoming meeting. The area's regional transportation planner and BRTA were also invited to participate in the discussion.

Local residents at the meeting presented convincing personal stories of the need for an improved transportation system for people without cars. Congressman Olver suggested that nbCC work with local transportation planners to collect and assess data of community needs and assets regarding transportation. He also suggested they work with a national transportation advocacy group, the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) to best determine what options could work in the region. After this meeting, nbCC spent the following year working with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission to collect data and, with CTAA, to look at how a potential system could address the problems. A workgroup consisting of representatives of the nbCC, consumers of transportation services, as well as transportation planners and providers oversaw this process.

It proved to be tricky. The local transportation authority was threatened by a national organization coming in to discuss the potential of providing services directly. They did what they could to derail the process. Between meetings there was grumbling, as Transportation Committee representatives began taking sides on the big questions. Was the existing transportation system adequate? Did the BRTA have the knowledge and assets to establish a demand-response system for Northern Berkshire? Should this group, facilitated by neutral nbCC, work with an outside consultant? The group continued meeting and stayed on course, studying the transportation needs and resources of the region and continuing to bring their ideas before a larger citizen body. nbCC was also mindful of the need to keep the process moving and the probability that it could become mired in conflict and politics. The process culminated in September, 2001 during a community transportation summit attended by about thirty five people. At this meeting, facilitated by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, the group concluded that there was a need for a demand-response system and that CTAA was best equipped to manage the initiative. Based on these fruitful discussions, Congressman Olver agreed to submit an 'earmark request' to support creation of the Transportation Association of Northern Berkshire (TANB).

CTAA is currently managing this local project and an independent Board of Directors was established to begin forming a local not-for-profit corporation that will oversee it. In addition, an advisory board consisting of service consumers and other stakeholders was created to oversee and offer policy suggestions to the new TANB Board. A grand opening

for TANB was held in early September, 2002. During its first eleven months of operation, TANB provided over 35,000 employment-related rides to Northern Berkshire residents.

The creation of the local transportation system was a huge success for the Northern Berkshire region and a tremendous asset to bring the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition closer to its vision. As an organization, nbCC was credited with the advocacy and community conversations necessary for TANB's creation. They were seen as highly credible in the eyes of a powerful US Congressman, both by local residents and by the Congressman himself. This success, and the respect it fostered, continued to bring nbCC to a new stage of organizational maturity.

Equally important to the success of this venture was the way in which nbCC saw its role as convener of the parties. It saw the "gap" of an inadequate transportation system and carefully brought together the necessary parties to create a burning platform so others could see the impact of the problem and urgency to address it. It then assembled the necessary groups, two of whom saw each other as competitors, to collaboratively arrive at a solution. They facilitated the initial funding through legislative representatives and, as the new program was launched, backed away as an active stakeholder.

Accomplishments

The vision of nbCC demands they engage in much more work on many different fronts. For example, to realize their dream of providing transportation to Northern Berkshire County residents who do not have access to automobiles will require more than an expanded program. They have already established an effective system to support people who call for employment-related rides, but more work lies ahead with local organizations to create an effective and efficient local transportation network that leverages existing resources. Three local Councils on Aging have their own vans and provide their own transportation for their residents. Some human service providers give rides only to their own clients. School buses are used only for school children and sit idle while school is in session. Bringing these parties together to find ways that can weave these resources together is no easy task. Yet they struggle with strategies for convincing providers who own the resources to share them in the interest of the broader community.

nbCC can say with confidence that people who need to work should be able to get to their job thanks to the Transportation Association of Northern Berkshire. But this is only one example of how “process becomes product.” Their region does not (except in very rare circumstances) put up homeless individuals and families in motels. Rather, they have developed a compassionate response for homeless households in the Family Life Support Center and its shelter, Louison House. Households average three or four months’ stay in the shelter system before getting housing of their own. The region’s local homeless programs work hard to give households the necessary tools to manage the responsibilities of housing during their stay at Louison House.

A prevailing cultural value of the Northern Berkshire region results in a general belief among communities that they should take care of their own. This was translated in the health care arena with the creation of Ecu-Health Care, Inc. a program that has recruited local physicians who give up part of their paying practice and each accept a number of Ecu-Health Care clients (all of whom are uninsurable) into their practice for a very small fee. Local services have banded together to foster programs to support families as they raise children. Parenting programs, programs to help people avoid eviction due to code violations, and neighborhood-based information and outreach, are active and helpful to the Northern Berkshire community thanks to the work of the nbCC. These are the most prominent new programs that the process of the nbCC has helped to create. There are others, all of which have made an impact on many lives.

In addition to the monthly Community Coalition meetings already described, there are two distinct programs managed directly by nbCC and funded through their efforts:

1. Northern Berkshire Neighbors is a neighborhood development program founded in 1993 to increase citizen awareness and participation. Eight Northern Berkshire neighborhoods currently have active associations and a governance structure. They have a regular schedule of meetings, a process to make decisions, and recognized leadership. Six times each year, leaders of these neighborhood groups gather for a Neighborhood Summit that offers them opportunities to engage with other community leaders to better understand and address local

neighborhood issues. nbCC and its board actively supports and nurtures all of these projects.

2. UNITY (United, Neighboring, Interdependent, Trusted Youth) was created in 1994 as a forum for youth in the Northern Berkshire region. A collaboration between nbCC and the area's seven middle and high schools, the UNITY Inter-School Forum brings together more than seventy students from the region to discuss and address issues they deem important. A Council sets the agendas for the quarterly Forums and addresses local youth issues as they arise. The CommUNITY Arts Program arose directly in response to one of the expressed needs. It provides opportunities for artistic expression and community involvement through a teen-led coffee house (The Grooove), writing workshops, teen leadership development, and a public arts program. UNITY, their Youth development program, has a UNITY Council for both middle and high school aged youth. The role of the Council is to set the agendas for the quarterly forums and address local youth issues as they arise. The UNITY Arts program happens to be a programmatic response, addressed by a subsidiary organization, that is directly under the management of nbCC. UNITY has a Community Arts Advisory Board whose role, in turn, is to oversee local arts programming for teens (these include The Grooove Teen Coffee House, the Writer's Workshop, and the Public Arts Project). The UNITY Program coordinator, along with the Al Bashevkin, host a monthly Youth Collaborative meeting which brings together all the youth service providers into a monthly meeting (with food!) with the goal to increase networking among youth service providers and to foster a common local approach as we work with our teens.
3. The Community Wellness Advisory Board (CWAB) was created in 1999 by the nbCC to reduce duplication of meetings that address prevention. Previously, each local school conducted meetings for their health advisory committees, the local tobacco control programs held meetings to market their prevention efforts, and the nbCC facilitated meetings to foster appropriate local policies towards substance use. The CWAB is a collaboration of all these groups whose impact has been to merge each of the previous prevention meetings into one inclusive quarterly gathering and to offer a forum for community leaders to talk about local prevention efforts without the inefficient redundancy that previously existed.

All exist only because of the work of the nbCC. But simply engaging a community and organizing as a coalition does not assure these results.

Critical Success Factors – Why have they become so effective?

How effective has nbCC really been? There is no formal, analytic way of knowing. Both of its two senior-most executives, Al Bashevkin and Kathy Keeser, have talked about their desire for a systemic independent evaluation of nbCC and honest feedback on its role in helping to shape the community. But their resources have been too lean to support such reflection.

So, in lieu of external reviews, they look for milestones indicating whether they are getting closer to their vision. They look at the continued breadth and depth of participation in the public forums they facilitate. If over sixty people attend each monthly meeting for the past (at least five) years, then there must be something in those meetings that people need - and their needs are being met. If the attendance at their Annual meeting rises each year (this year they had over 200), then there must be support for the way they address community-level needs. If over 40,000 rides have been provided to local residents in the past eleven months to assist with their employment, and if over 1,770 uninsured individuals have been matched with a physician thanks to Ecu-Health Care, then they believe they are making a measurable difference in peoples' lives. None of these programs would be in place if not for the conversations and advocacy offered by the nbCC.

But it appears clear to an outside observer that nbCC's success is a result a set of core values that play themselves out in virtually all interactions.

1. They have a reputation for **reliability** – doing what they promise and following through on issues the community identifies as problematic are values they adhere to stringently. U.S. Congressman John Olver has often vocally commented that nbCC should be viewed as a national benchmark for the process of how community-level proposals to endemic problems can lead to effective solutions. Ideas that began as discussion in the “public space” forum of the nbCC have led to formal programmatic models where funding was secured and solutions implemented. State and private funders trust their organizational judgment as well as their capacity to deliver on expectations.
2. They are masterful at **building and fostering genuine relationships** across the spectrum of sectors and interests in the community. This is not easy with the increasing divide between the haves and the have-nots, yet it is the thread that weaves through many of the countless discussions at monthly Coalition meetings and the focus for many smaller committee meetings. Why is there such poverty in a region perceived by so many as relatively comfortable? What are the root causes of this poverty and how can they be addressed? While the questions are broad and seemingly overwhelming, nbCC's ability to meaningfully facilitate community discussions centered on them, among disparate parties, often with competing interests, has led to clear identification of problems and actions that have helped to ameliorate many of the disparities.
3. By virtue of the uniquely **neutral role** nbCC plays, it is the acknowledged ‘community convener’ and brings together organizations, groups and individuals who may otherwise prefer to not engage with each other. In their prior incarnation as a community-

based public health initiative, they were perceived as just another health and human services group. Branded as this, yet also keenly aware of the sense of hopelessness and isolation individuals faced in trying to work with long-established community institutions such as schools, churches and health care facilities, their name change to a ‘community coalition’ helped to set them apart from the more traditional organizations and allow them a distinct and independent voice with residents in local partnerships.

4. One reason their process is so effective is due to a ***commitment to respect the culture*** of each group they work with. An element of why their process is so effective is their commitment to respect the culture of each group they associate with. This means that each committee, task force, or Board meets during the times most convenient for its members, and nbCC enables them to create their own “meeting culture,” even though most meetings are facilitated by a staff member of nbCC. Respect for these micro-level cultures, paired with nbCC’s ability to effectively facilitate groups within each culture, creates a place and space where the viewpoints and issues of each “contributing group” can be aired.

5. Finally, in part because of their distinctive competencies, individuals become involved as a result of their ***interest and commitment***, rather than by designation. Attendees at all their venues seem to want to be a part of a greater whole.

Structure and Leadership

The Board, who is ultimately responsible for governance, consists of 17 members at present: three are neighborhood leaders, three retired members of the community, two represent the faith community, and others serve on behalf of businesses, local colleges, and the media. Their board President is the Vice President of Hoosac Bank, the largest local lending institution in Northern Berkshire. Vice President and past President is currently Vice President for Academic Affairs at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA), their local State college.

It is a diverse broad with representatives of neighborhoods, youth workers, and local agencies also among the members. An Executive Committee, Finance Committee, and Personnel Committee help to streamline the decision making process.

There are many committees, task forces, forums, and advisory groups under the umbrella of the nbCC and they all directly influence the direction that the nbCC takes. Many board members, and often those with severe professional pressures already on their time, are active on these committees. Committees are used for decision making in all programs of the nbCC, Northern Berkshire Neighbors, UNITY, and the Core.

While formal decision making for the nbCC rests with its Board of Directors and the Board provides leadership for new programs and initiatives, decisions about new directions for Coalition staff, and fiscal decisions, the staff does not depend on the board for all strategic decisions. Committees and special advisory boards are given considerable autonomy, and while the Board stays informed of the consequences of the decisions they make, it has no desire to control all the decisions made within the nbCC. So, the decentralized consensus-building processes keep the momentum of the nbCC strong. The Board's decisions to work with a decision-making structure that is both centralized and decentralized is a reflection of their desire to support the processes of the nbCC, which are a mix of a grassroots, community organizing movement and a formal corporate decision-making processes.

Organizational decision making is both bottom-up and top-down. In their desire to take the long view to problems to assure they are addressed strategically, they rely on local-level meetings, forums and committees to help them understand up-to-the-minute status of community needs and issues. Simultaneously, they seek a wide view that will encompass the diversity of social issues the community faces more broadly.

The Board holds decision making authority over the addition of new grants and initiatives, personnel policies for Coalition staff, particular programmatic decisions (as in the topics for the monthly meetings), the adoption of annual budgets and spending oversight, and the supervision of the Executive Director. But authority is vested in coalition committees and task forces by those who actively participate, and they *learn* to reach decisions by consensus. The exact process by which each group makes decisions is unique, however, and shaped to a large degree by the “culture” that emerges with diverse individuals working collegially over time.

The dynamic between Bashevkin and Keeser model those of the organization as a whole: No one appears to have authority over the other. In fact, sitting in a room listening to them both talk animatedly about nbCC, one might easily conclude that Bashevkin reports to Keeser. They dance well together, don't step on each others' toes, but occasionally do push back on one another with equanimity.

A Broader Vision with a Focused Future

The creation and support for the transportation network, which Congressman Olver describes as “coming from the people,” is a measure of nbCC’s success as a collaboration.

The *raison d’être* of their vision is “to organize people and resources dedicated to improving the quality of life in Northern Berkshire.” At times they find this daunting, but it also allows them the breadth of flexibility to address many different issues concurrently. As a neutral organization, they are able to take on local issues as planners and then look to others who will implement programming. Organizations with a single-issue vision (health care, mental health care, day care, etc) are typically limited by a tightly-banded mission that limits the activities they can legitimately get involved in. nbCC made a very conscious decision to cut this band when it reorganized as an independent non-profit.

But this does not mean that its vision is limitless or without direction. They are committed to the Northern Berkshire region in spite of invitations to become involved farther south in the county. Their vision-related strategy is the notion of “process as product.” Serving as conveners, helping others collaborate, identifying gaps in the socioeconomic landscape to target...all represent process as their deliverable. The opium of many community-based non-profits is to see the possibilities of direct delivery of services where grants may be easily available. With project funding coursing through their financial veins, they grow and become ever more addicted to larger projects – however unrelated to the core vision they may be – to support the proportionately increasing overhead.

nbCC has honed its skills over the years and earned the credibility to work with a variety of sectors simultaneously. In turn, this has led them to become quite successful in bringing essential programs to the region that directly address quality of life issues for its residents. These programs target the consequences that deep poverty has wrought on the region. Issues such as homelessness, health care, transportation, and family stability are embraced for seemingly obvious reasons but, most importantly to them, they represent the concerns of their membership and, in this regard, remain true to their vision. While their organizational membership is diverse, the soul of all initiatives never wavers from the voice of local residents. They are mostly low income and can benefit significantly from the program ideas brought to the Coalition.

Their success evokes more questions. While we have been successful, for example, at helping the community create a local transportation system, how can they impact the growing disparities between the rich and the poor of the region? Superficially, it looks like it’s about jobs. But more substantially it’s about building the community’s commitment to address deeper social issues. This cannot be done without a deeper engagement of the business community and the new cultures that are populating our region. These are the challenges that our organization face. We hope that the new visibility of the nbCC thanks, to our success in such areas as the transportation arena and dimensions of social infrastructure, will enable us to take the next organizational leap to assist the broader community in addressing the larger social issues of the region.