

Litchfield Hills Greenprint Collaborative: Vision to Action

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The Birth of the Litchfield Hills Greenprint Collaborative

The Litchfield Hills Greenprint Collaborative (“the Collaborative”) began 5 years ago and is an organization that goes against the grain of Connecticut, the “land of steady habits.” Connecticut is a state that has limited capacity for regional planning. There are no vestiges left of county-wide government, aside from the county names and census. There is either action at the state level or at the municipal level. Therefore, anything that wants to be regional also crosses long-standing organizational boundaries. Regional land trusts are rare. There aren't single entities that focus on being aware of when something transformative might be going on at a larger scale – this was one reason behind the formation of the Collaborative. Another reason was exasperation. Private individuals came forward who wanted to increase the level and quality of conservation. Since all conservation in CT is done at the single-town level, some land trusts (LT's) are completely volunteer and, thus, don't have a large capacity. Some LT's do lots of conservation, but don't do any stewardship. Others have a history of conservation, but haven't done much lately. Furthermore, the price of land in Litchfield County far exceeds any funds an individual land trust has been able to raise on their own – it is not unusual for a parcel of land that is considered indispensable for both regional and local reasons to go for multiple millions of dollars. So, some non-LT people with their own financial resources expressed interest in a regionally-based organization.

The Beginnings of the Litchfield Hills Greenprint Collaborative

The first model of the Collaborative was comprised of two organizations – the Trust for Public Land (TPL) and the Housatonic Valley Association (HVA). This initial planning initiative had a lot of local involvement and GIS capacity, and its major goal was to answer the following questions:

- Where is the protected land? This is a mystery in CT, as there is no state-wide compilation of conservation easements. Therefore, beginning the Collaborative involved a lot of town hall visits and digging around in state records.
- What is rural character? Many people do have a fondness for farmland and rural land, but the term is defined quite differently by various organizations.

The data they collected was then organized, analyzed, and shared. This brought about a few basic questions:

- How many acres of farmland need to be kept available for farming to maintain food security?
- What is an acceptable compromise (e.g., the proximate impacts of a new home versus the regional benefits of something else)?

At this point, since the Collaborative was an idea that came from non-conservation folks, it was time to answer what was initially dismissed as obvious, common knowledge:

- What do we care about?
- Where is it?
- What is it really worth to us?
- Will we change our behaviors to protect it?

The Next Phase: Implementation

Everyone involved had started building mutual trust and respect through the mapping and planning phase. Now it was time for the implementation phase and, since it had become a far more locally-driven project, TPL and HVA had to give up control. They had to think about how to share donors, which was essentially an issue of getting people to support multiple efforts and multiple entities. They also had to think about how to save land through the development process.

Through their data analysis, the Collaborative figured out that they need 70,000 more acres preserved to effectively conserve three key resources: (1) forestland, (2) private farmland, and (3) water quality. This involves at least doubling the current pace of conservation. So far, 2 of every 3 acres they've managed to protect have covered at least one of these key resources. Now they're focusing their efforts on prioritizing and building their relationships with landowners. They are also starting to raise money for a collective pledge fund. Money from this fund will only be called in when a vetted project that meets the Collaborative's criteria (see the handouts) is approved. This would allow private donors to invest their money their own way, since they trust the approval system.

Organization of the Collaborative

Governance is another issue. The Collaborative is not a 501(c)(3), but it does function as a governing board. It has a board of 13 people who have authority granted by HVA, which has fiscal responsibility. Some members want a standalone entity, but others feel that moving in that direction would threaten the mutual trust that they've developed. There are 24 of 30 possible LT's involved. Each member pays an annual fee of \$250-500 that funds up-to-date maps, one-on-one time with Tim, creative problem solving with everyone involved, and preferential attention when they have a massive project come up. So far, they've all found plenty of value in this, though some of their interests and needs will eventually change. All of the LT's involved are worried about their own viability (e.g., how do they go about getting accredited when their boards aren't really on-board?). There is also an interesting tension to the Collaborative: some members are doers who want to go out and save a lot of land, while others are worried that if they keep on going, they'll just be digging themselves into a deeper hole. There are two partnerships not on the New England RCP map that are worth focusing on: the Coalition for Buzzards Bay and the Cape Cod Compact. Both exemplify that there can be a pooling of resources and staff that is still within an umbrella of their sponsoring entity. This might be a model for the Collaborative's future.

Current Collaborative Projects

The Collaborative now knows which parts of their area are most vulnerable and which include resources that are collectively indispensable. So, they are starting to do projects in 2-3 town subsections. This is the right way for them to go about it since they're already at the largest scale they can be while continuing to be an entity that functions with only quarterly meetings. The current trend for the Collaborative is sub-region projects. Land deals, creative problem solving, and cross-boundary fund-raising are all happening.

The Future of the Collaborative

Tim expects that their membership will eventually decrease down to a “coalition of the willing.” There are probably 15 truly invested members. While the other 9 don't want to miss out on potential opportunities, they aren't willing to truly invest their organizations by changing their board structures, changing their governance, or considering that mergers might be in their best interest. Overall, the Collaborative acts as a regional planning entity in a state without any regional plan, puts local data in a regional context, and challenges people to work in ways they haven't ever done before. Most importantly, it lets its members set the agenda, because it's theirs.

Questions

Q1: In regards to the tension between the strong town identity and your desire to move towards a regional focus, does that strong town identity both fuel and detract from your regional efforts?

A1: Yes – in part because we've been inclusive and responsive to what particular towns have said. We've become a trusted partner by recognizing that people identify themselves first by towns and by

individual LT's. We make our resources (GIS, assistance with land transactions) available as subsidized fee for service work and, in doing so, make our organization a local asset. It was definitely a challenge, because some towns were very happy and didn't see a problem. So, we had to push them a little bit.

Q2: How important was it to come up with that 70,000-acre number to go for, and how do you use it in your work?

A2: In most settings, it's been very helpful. It's a stretch goal, but it's driven by the implication of people saying that they care about these resources. We know spatially where they are and how much of them are permanently protected. There has been particularly good discussion on the farming and on the forest, including what sort of minimum viability exists. That number has been powerful at the sub-region level. For example, people have asked the Collaborative to help cluster this suite of farms running from one community to another and then package that information for conversations with NRCS or people who care about farmland conservation. It's also been powerful in the day-to-day work. We've been very successful at maximizing the number of federal conservation dollars that have come to this area. The Highlands Conservation Act and two of the last three successful Forest Legacy projects have been driven by the Collaborative. Initially, one land trust was terrified of that goal to the point that it didn't want to sign the MOU out of fear that they would become obligated to meet that goal. They missed the point of having that goal, though, so I had to work with them for a while on that. The major challenge is *when* we want to conserve those 70,000 acres by. If we want to do it by 2025, we're going to have to radically change what we're willing to see for land protection.

Q3: Does the map with the red show the parcels that you're looking at conserving?

A3: I've included two town-scale maps in the handouts. One (the one with the red) is resource-driven. The red sections show where farmland soil intersects with farm fields. The other map depicts parcels over 50 acres within the Town of Litchfield that have substantial amounts of one of the three key resources. Every member of the Collaborative gets those two maps and a regional map that puts it all into perspective. They get those maps updated after any projects they get done, as well. The Collaborative separated these into two maps because, in some places, putting anyone's specific parcel on the resource map was a non-starter. So, we made one just showing the resources, and then a separate one with the parcels.

Q4: Is there a map that shows which 70,000 acres you're going for?

A4: No. There is a map that shows which 140,000 acres there are to choose from. It's screened down to parcels of a certain size, but that's where opportunity, interest, and capacity converge.