

Letter from the Director

On December 1, I moved into Deb Burd's office here at the Western Mountains Alliance and was struck by how quickly time flies. Over ten years ago, I was a neophyte in Maine and working for a weekly newspaper in Kingfield. Deb Burd came into our offices to introduce us to the Alliance and encourage us to do a piece on Sustain Western Maine, a project that included a series of public forums in Franklin County where people were getting together to create a vision for their community.

From those early meetings emerged a set of community indicators for Franklin County that attempted to use quantitative measures such as per capita income and unemployment to capture a picture of where Franklin County was at, and where it might want to go. A lot happens in ten years.

Many more mills in western Maine have closed and some, such as Maine Wood Turning are finding ways to survive. Some of the area's small downtowns have continued to lose business and others such as Norway and Dover-Foxcroft are finding the niche markets and services that will bring renewed vitality. New houses and developments are going up everywhere and

thousands of acres of land has been conserved in western Maine.

Years ago my husband and I hiked to a dilapidated set of former housekeeping cabins in the Rangeley area to visit an elderly recluse who had managed to survive there for over 40 years without fuel, running water or electricity. Distant family and neighbors periodically brought in canned food and supplies. To the side of one house was a pile of old cans that reached up to the eaves. The antique buildings still projected hints of their former glory and everywhere around was old equipment abandoned in the exact spots where it had stopped. In the world outside, gravity-feed water systems, solar energy and composting toilets were not unusual.

As communities, families and individuals, we adapt to the constantly changing world or risk being left behind. Change is



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influenced by so many factors – our environment, the economy, public policies, our culture, the world. Adapting is a process analogous to a numbered connect-the-dots picture of “sustainable communities”. We’ve just figured out how to make the picture and suddenly all the numbers change.

At the Alliance, we see our role as one of connecting some of these dots—local leadership, sustainable agriculture, and public policy, for example—to support the capacity of communities to adapt and thrive. We can't do it alone. If you're reading this newsletter today, you are likely someone who cares about the future of this part of Maine. As we start 2006, we invite your ideas and insights and look forward to working with you to support the great communities here in western Maine.

Here's to a New Year!

- Tanya Swain

Tanya Swain has a B.A. in political science from the University of Washington in Seattle and is currently pursuing a Masters degree in Public Policy and Management from the Muskie School at USM. She served most recently as the regional coordinator for the Maine Community Foundation. Tanya was the program administrator of the Alliance's first Lead Western Maine program, and public relations coordinator for Maine's Rural Schools for Equity Initiative, which sought to bring about changes to the school funding formula.





WESTERN MOUNTAINS ALLIANCE

Mission Statement

The Western Mountains Alliance strives to improve the quality of life and to strengthen the regional identity of Maine, while honoring rural values and the environment, and supporting sustainable community development. We provide a forum to bring together many voices and many communities to find common ground through regional dialogue, bold thinking, and capacity building. We serve as an energetic advocate for the western mountains region.

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Projects, Grants and Communications Coordinator

Kathleen Beauregard, Industry

Here at the Alliance

The Alliance seeks many voices to inform its work in the region. We would like to sincerely thank the people and partners who are active in the Alliance's network. Together with these individuals and organizations we are building capacity for local leadership and supporting community development that respects the region's natural resources and rural heritage. The Alliance Board of Directors is grateful for the support and involvement following:

Western Maine Agricultural Advisory Committee

Mary Burr, Blue Ribbon Farm
Norris Conant, Canton
John Harker, Maine Department of Agriculture
Mark Hews, Threshold to Maine
Jim Hilton, Hilton Farms
Jason Kafka, Checkerberry Farm
Kerri Sands and John Piotti, Farms For the Future, Coastal Enterprise Inc.
Bob Neal, The Turkey Farm
Sid Stutzman, Stutzman Farms
Bussie York, Sandy River Farm

Western Maine Farm Fund Loan Partners

Androscoggin Bank
Bangor Savings Bank
Franklin Savings Bank
Skowhegan Savings Bank
UnitedKingfield Bank

Lead Western Maine Advisory Committee and Partners

Marvin Collins, Sunday River Ski Resort
Jack Frost, Forest for the Future Logging and Contracting
Deb Gorham, R.N. Rumford Community Hospital



The Western Maine Legislative Caucus sponsors three public forums each year, bringing together legislators and citizens to discuss issues of importance to the region's people.

Cheri Snow, Penquis Community Action Program
Mary Tani, TDS Telecom
Nancy Marshall, Nancy Marshall Communications
Barbara Olson, Growth Council of Oxford Hills
Patty Duguay, River Valley Healthy Community Coalition
Merlene Sanborn, Penquis Higher Education Center
Nancy Warren, Lake George Regional Park
Theo Kalikow, University of Maine at Farmington

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A Special Note...

A special note of appreciation goes to **Charles Nielsen**, University of Southern Maine intern and English Department Chair at Dirigo High School. Charles is spending two semesters to assist with an assessment of the Alliance's impact in the western Maine region. Over the summer of 2005 Charles conducted interviews with 38 individuals from a broad spectrum of influence and with current or past connections to the Alliance. Thanks to Charles for his skillful research and to all the interviewees who have shared their time and forthright insights. The final report will guide the Alliance's future work. Watch for more information later this year.

A Look Back At the Alliance in 2005

Building a Bright Future

Looking back to the founding of the Western Mountains Alliance in 1987, our mission statement has changed little in almost two decades. The sweeping economic and community changes over that same period in rural Maine counties, however, are undeniable. In 2005, the Alliance began a project to study its impact in the region through those times of change.

Has the Alliance strengthened a regional identity and voice for

western Maine? Have we built leadership capacity in the towns and villages of the mountain counties? Have we influenced policy makers to consider sustainable development principles in their planning? Has our support and advocacy for traditional and natural resource industries made a difference?

The Alliance began this assessment through a narrative inquiry process, seeking stories about our efficacy and responsiveness to a changing Maine. In addition to documenting the lessons learned, the Alliance's Board of Directors is receiving valuable community input into future directions and strategies. (See page 2, "A Special Note" for more about the assessment).

Farm Loan Fund Loans A Quarter Million Dollars

The Western Maine Farm Fund (WMFF) strives to fill a niche in the financial services marketplace to enable small and medium sized farms to thrive as vital enterprises through low-interest fixed-rate guaranteed loans. "This represents an important investment in the region," said John Harker of the Maine Department of Agriculture in an editorial to the Bridgton

News. "We need to help farms in this region and helping farmers with accessing credit is one of the best ways we can help."

Established by the Alliance through the generosity of an anonymous donor, guided by a regional advisory committee, and administered in partnership with five area banks, the WMFF has guaranteed 15 loans totaling \$290,000 since its beginning in 2003. These loans contribute to the

sustainability of farms and have been used for spring start-up and harvest costs, equipment and animal

purchases, repairs, trail development for ag-tourism, the construction of living quarters for workers and the purchase of abutting land, to secure access to a farmer's hayfield.

Eat Smart Eat Local – Support our Farmers

The Alliance was recognized by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation as a leader in innovative policies and practices that help invigorate rural community development and received a two-year grant award to build a vital local foods system in Franklin and



Paula Day with Jennifer Hartung of Farmington, who submitted the winning entry. Her work will be the logo of our effort to stimulate a vital local food system.

Lead Western Maine Projects 2005

- Skowhegan Chamber of Commerce
- Open Access Software for Non-Profits, Oxford County
- Bethel's Creative Economy Education Initiative Conference
- Strong Area Business and Civic Alliance
- Girl Scouts of Kennebec County Adult Recruitment
- Phillips Area Chamber of Commerce
- EvenStart Family Literacy Program
- Public Transportation in Western Maine
- Greater Rumford Community Center
- Dixfield Opera House Healthy Connection

Somerset counties. The Alliance kicked off the campaign with an art poster contest, "The Art of Eating Well." Because the range of artistic talent was so impressive, and because the artwork is so expressive on the subject of the importance of local agriculture, a traveling exhibit of all of the work is being planned. Look for venues and schedules on the Alliance's website.

The display of posters is only one facet of the drive to increase awareness of the importance of local agriculture. Paula Day, director of the project, is working with Alison Hagerstrom, Greater Franklin Economic Development Director, and Audrey Lovering, Director of Skowhegan's Main Street redevelopment project, on another arts-based plan to "bring the farms to town."

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...helping to shape western Maine's future

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Meetings with administrators at MSAD 54 and MSAD 9, University of Maine at Farmington personnel, and farmers are ongoing as we attempt to create the bridge between local farmers and our largest regional institutional food service providers.

A series of workshops for farmers is being scheduled for 2006. The purpose of this educational outreach will be to help farmers diversify their operations to meet increased local demand for local products.

With a goal of extending our agricultural marketing season beyond September, the first workshop in February will give farmers detailed information on creating low-cost, on-farm vegetable storage systems. See our web site for details.

Farm Marketing Workshops

Farm Marketing and Image Building workshops held in January and March assisted twenty farmers to develop a professional farm logo and build an overall farm image to boost consumer loyalty and sales. Facilitated by Kerri Sands and Gabe McPhail of Coastal Enterprises, Inc., the workshops were co-sponsored by the Alliance, River Valley Growth Council and University of Maine Cooperative Extension. 95% of the participants gained new knowledge about promotional materials and business planning during the workshops and would recommend it to a friend!

Leaders Inspire Change Through Cooperative Action

Since its inception in 2002, Lead Western Maine (LWM) has directly helped 42



Lucia Colombaro, recently appointed to the statewide Creative Economy Council, shares her vision for an inclusive Bethel area network that supports creative endeavors.

rural citizens to learn skills and tools to build projects that strengthen the region. LWM participants use their unique leadership styles and skills to inspire and mobilize people, groups and organizations to cooperate for shared aspirations.

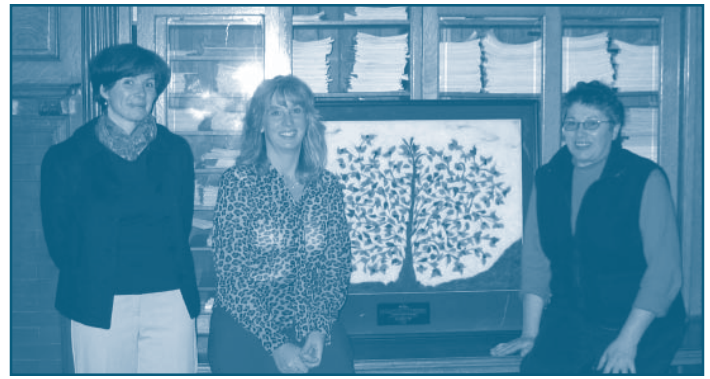
2005 LWM alumni, Lucia Colombaro said, "Our project [Bethel's Creative Community Education Initiative] moved from concept to execution. More than this, though, is the development of my leadership skills and my understanding of leadership. With the tools I have acquired through LWM, I feel I will be able to contribute to all future projects in which I participate in a much more substantial way. If someone has a passion to work to better their community, this program is everything you could hope for: expertise to address your needs, access to key relationships and resources and, most importantly, dedicated time with guidance for your project so you get your work done."

Cummings Leadership Award

The King Cummings Leadership Award is given biennially in honor of the late King Cummings, founder of the Western Mountains Alliance. This year's recipient, Maine WoodNet, a regional initiative of The Wilderness Society, was honored for organizing small wood manufacturers and other small companies in the western mountains region that produce products that connect our

forests and communities.

Maine WoodNet initiated the member-owned Sugar Wood Gallery in 2001, locally made high



Tanya Swain, Executive Director of the Western Mountains Alliance, and Becky Davis-Allen, Alliance Board Chairperson, present the 2005 King Cummings Leadership Award to Chris Krauss of Maine WoodNet.

quality wood and artisan products. "A new gallery in Vermont is underway, linking Maine with the multi-state Northern Forest," said Chris Krauss, Maine WoodNet's Coordinator.

Alliance Chairperson Becky Davis-Allen said, "By working together, Maine WoodNet members from Franklin, Somerset and Oxford counties maximize the efficiency of wood use to ensure that our forests will be enjoyed for generations to come. They are the first in the nation to have certified chain of custody of their wood products. This assures that the wood comes from certified forests and that the entire process is certified as ecologically sustainable from log to consumer."

"These products and companies demonstrate what can be achieved by identifying with the Western Mountains as a regional brand." The award is made possible by a grant from the King and Jean Cummings Charitable Trust Fund of the Maine Community Foundation.

The Board Network

In a new partnership with The Board Network, the Alliance co-sponsored a September workshop on the Core Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards for the first time in western Maine. The Alliance appreciates Suzanne Austin, Executive Director of The Board Network: a phenomenal collaborator!

“I have learned quite a few points to check on our bylaws.” “Panelists were well-versed in their fields.” “Handouts, book, and discussion all valuable. Hope to put to great use.” – comments from participants. A repeat session will be held in Somerset County in April, with hopes for replication in both Oxford and Piscataquis counties in 2006.

Western Maine Legislative Caucus

This year the six-member caucus sponsored public forums on emergency preparedness in Franklin County and the impact of both Maine health care reform and property tax reform on rural communities. Citizens have a face-to-face exchange with legislators and decision makers where they share their knowledge and perspective about issues of common concern.

A Decade of Thanks

In 2005 the Western Mountains Alliance said goodbye to its Executive Director of ten years, Deb Burd. During her tenure she built a financially strong organization that gained national atten-

tion and was the catalyst for the development of scores of innovative projects and organizations. Deb has moved on to the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, where she continues as a champion for rural America’s heritage, environment and sustainable communities. An overview of Deb’s accomplishments can be seen on the Alliance’s website – look for the timeline.

Technical Assistance

In 2005 the Alliance staff provided direct support, tools and/or information to the Business Education Task Force, Greater Franklin County Children’s Network, Livermore Falls Betterment Group, Fairbanks Neighborhood School, Washburn-Norlands Living History Center, Maurer Meals project, and the Strong Business and Civic Alliance. Together with collaborative partners the Alliance cosponsored the first Western Maine Investors Fair (see page 6) and is providing technical assistance on organizational development and funding strategies to the fledgling Dixfield Opera House Healthy Connection project.



Making Connections

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energy in western Maine. Mountain Counties Heritage, Inc. undertook a development project in collaboration with Greater Franklin Development Corp., and a private developer to create an office complex housing community and economic development field offices. MECEP’s project “Spreading Prosperity to the Other Maine” grew out of its work with the Collaborative and seeks to broaden the understanding of the barriers to prosperity in Maine’s rim counties, through a symposium and research agenda.

The Collaborative continues to act as a catalyst, a convener and a connector. Together, these four organizations are spreading the word about sustainable development principles, building local leadership, and linking resources with good ideas for Western Maine.



Here at the Alliance

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Alliance Impact Study Advisory Committee

Kathleen Welch, University of Maine at Farmington
Mark Lapping, Unity College and University of Southern Maine
Paul Frederic, University of Maine at Farmington
Rebecca Welsh, Rumford Community Arts and Maine Arts Commission
Charles Nielsen, Intern from University of Southern Maine
John Wentworth, Moosehead Manufacturing Company
Gregory Gallant, Margaret Chase Smith Library

Western Maine Legislative Caucus

Michael Cormier and Sue Pratt, Maine School Administration District 9
Richard Batt and Leah Binder, Franklin County Health Network
Theo Kalikow, University of Maine at Farmington
Moira Wolohan and Valerie Hueber, University of Maine at Farmington
Scott Planting, Mission at the Eastward Fen Fowler, Western Maine Community Action

Western Maine Sustainable Development Collaborative

Steve Cole, Coastal Enterprises, Inc.

Kit St. John, Maine Center for Economic Policy
Bruce Hazard, Mountain Counties Heritage, Inc.

Funding Partners

In addition to membership and donor contributions, the Alliance gratefully received financial support in 2005 from the King and Jean Cummings Charitable Trust Fund of the Maine Community Foundation, the Sandy River Charitable Trust Foundation, the Philanthropic Collaborative, and W.K. Kellogg Foundation.





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Making Connections: The Western Maine Sustainable Development Collaborative

The Western Maine Sustainable Development Collaborative (WMSDC) was formed three years ago to concretely advance the prosperity of the people of the four counties in western Maine by shifting the demand for investment in the region. Mountain Counties Heritage Inc., Coastal Enterprises, Inc., Maine Center for Economic Policy and Western Mountains Alliance joined forces to mobilize a rural development agenda, to improve the region's leadership and to connect investors with private or public interests with worthy projects in Piscataquis, Somerset, Franklin and Oxford counties.

Kit St. John, Executive Director of the Maine Center for Economic Policy (MECEP) shared in an interview about the Alliance's impact in the region, "The Alliance was particularly helpful, and

ultimately lead WMSDC to receive several hundred thousand dollars from a combination of sources. That has enabled WMSDC to develop a more specific, concrete, on the ground program, which included a conference a year ago called *Shared Assets*, and a publication on the subject."

"Connection making," says St. John, "is a feature of the WMSDC, four organizations working together, but the Alliance has played an absolutely critical role in bringing us together and making sure that the projects that we've taken on are as well connected as possible with people in the region." The Alliance was instrumental in encouraging Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI), the largest community development corporation in the state, to establish an office in western Maine. This has led to CEI providing

support to emerging ventures in western mountains, such as the Opportunity Center in Northern Franklin County.

The Collaborative organized an *Investors Fair*, which introduced promising organizations seeking investment to foundations and social investors interested in the sustainability of western Maine. Ten organizations and businesses gave brief presentations at the September 2005 event. The Collaborative also supported the HomeTown Competitiveness Conference held in May at Thomas College.

In 2005, CEI began an initiative to bring more technical and community college courses to Franklin County, an effort to get the working poor into new or quality used cars, and a feasibility study of wind

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