

Vision



Berlin, New Hampshire: A Vision for 2030!

Through hard work, strong leadership and a dedicated citizenry, Berlin has gone through transformational experiences. It is a place of wealth, scenic beauty, and community, one that values a mixed-use environment, and which supports its businesses, arts, entertainment, education, leisure, parks and ease of living for residents of all ages. Fiscally sound, it is strengthened by a diverse cultural history, innovation, abundant natural, cultural, and historic resources, and an energetic community, with committed officials and collaborative organizations.

This solid economic base, the great improvement in the City's housing stock, and the stunning mountain/river setting in which Berlin sits have made it one of the most attractive and desirable places to live in New Hampshire. Many new entrepreneurial businesses, whose owners and workers appreciate the ready access to skiing, motorized trail sports, boating, hiking and other outdoor opportunities have been attracted to Berlin. These individuals, and the successful Coos Branding program, have in turn fostered the development of new specialty shops in a revitalized Downtown and great improvements to the City's schools, services, and infrastructure have been successfully achieved.

In short, Berlin is *the* place to be in the North Country.

The Visioning Process

Over the course of the past year, the City of Berlin has engaged its citizens in a variety of ways to get a sense of what they really like about the City, what they are concerned about, and what their hopes for the future are. This outreach was designed to get a sense of how the current residents would like to see the community evolve over the next twenty years.

This reaching out was done in a variety of ways. There have been facilitated discussions at a series of three public forums. Each of these was attended by anywhere from 45 to 75 individuals. There was a scientific survey administered by faculty at Plymouth State University to some 833 Berlin households (with a response rate of 48.9%!). Additionally, some 400+ high school students took an on-line survey about the future of Berlin as part of their social studies program.

All told, well over 1000 people have taken the time to express their thoughts regarding the future of Berlin.

This is a critically important time for Berlin. The pulp mill which had operated as the industrial heart of the City for over 100 years closed in 2006. The City is searching for a new economic future. One prison has opened there and another is under construction. The downtown economy remains fragile, but people are hopeful. Recent research by the Carsey Institute confirms that, despite the national and statewide economic downturns, despite the closing of the mill, people in Berlin remain optimistic about their future and the future of their community. Fifty-two percent of the individuals questioned felt that Berlin is poised for an upswing, and that it will be a better place to live ten years from now.

The following material outlines some broad themes as to what the citizens of Berlin envision the future bringing to their portion of the Androscoggin Valley over the next twenty years.

Berlin will have retained, and even improved on, its attractive physical appearance!

There is an appreciation for the architecture in this industrial community. People like the historic structures. People reflected positively on a number of structures that have been improved. The Albert Theatre and the buildings associated with the Northern Forest Heritage Park were particularly mentioned. The Cornerstone property on Main Street was cited as a new building that fits well with the older ones. There is a hope that other properties, both in the Downtown and elsewhere might follow these examples, either restoring what is there or constructing new that fits with the old.

There is recognition that at present there is an oversupply of residential units, a remnant of the time when Berlin's population topped 20,000 people. There is an appreciation of the efforts by the City and related agencies to remove surplus units and to enforce modern building and life safety codes on all properties. There is a hope that in twenty years supply and demand will be back in balance, and that Berlin will be a city of well kept, well maintained neighborhoods.

People like the architecture of Main Street. They like its scale and architectural details. There is a hope that a new specialty retail economy can succeed here, and that these new stores will re-introduce a vitality to Main Street that has been lacking of late.

Berlin will have taken better advantage of its beautiful location!

With the era of the pulp mill behind it, there is a strong sense that Berlin must take fuller advantage of its beautiful natural surroundings.

The Androscoggin River is seen as a much underutilized asset. People spoke of reconnecting the City with the river, through additional walking paths, through increased utilization of the river (perhaps with canoeing and kayaking events), and simply by improving visual access to it, especially in the Downtown.

There is a strong interest in seeing more natural resource-based recreation. People spoke of creating a system of multi-use, multi-seasonal trails ringing the City. There is enthusiasm for connecting existing snow machine and four-wheeler trails with the urban core, allowing users to pass safely through the Downtown as they travel from trails to the east and west of the City.

There is a hope that the summits of Mount Forist and Mount Jasper will remain undeveloped, natural attractions.

Overall, people want to see that the connections between the urban core and the surrounding natural resources will be many, and that the opportunities to connect one with the other will be established in every neighborhood of the City.

Berlin will have continued to celebrate its rich cultural heritage!

People like the Northern Forest Heritage Park. They like the St. Kieran Community Center. They like that the Nansen Ski Club is the oldest one in the country. They expect that these organizations will be thriving in twenty years, and that there will be other events and cultures celebrated as well.

People see opportunities to add other festivals and activities. There was discussion of arranging for a tourist train coming to see the fall foliage and celebrate Berlin's rail connections. They hope that by 2030 the ski jump has been repaired at the Nansen Wayside on Route 16, and that it has become a focal point for skiing and a new winter carnival.

Berlin will have retained its small town atmosphere!

Berlin is a friendly, caring place. People envision that it will stay that way, that this community will remain a safe place to raise a family, a place where neighbors help each other.

People want to see more community gathering places, both outdoors and indoors. There is a strong feeling that the closing of the Community Center 1970s was a tremendous loss. People envision opening a new community center, and that by 2030 it is a well established gathering site for Berlin citizens of all ages.

People like that Berlin is a walkable community, both in terms of its size and its pedestrian safety. They want it to stay that way, and even see it improved with additional walking paths and other trails.

Berlin is a community of volunteers. There is a sense that with its limited financial resources, many of the things that are outlined here will have to be done by citizens themselves and not by City government. There is a sense that people will volunteer, but that there needs to be created some form of coordinating framework, so that people know

what is needed and how they can help. There was a suggestion that the City web-site might become such a location for connecting volunteers with projects.

Berlin's economy has become strong and diverse!

There is sense that Coos Economic Action Plan and the Coos Branding efforts will work, and that these new regional efforts will help Berlin once again be the center of a strong regional economy, an economy that is diverse both in terms of the types of businesses in the area, and in terms of the skills needed to work in those businesses.

People see opportunities for manufacturing, tourism, retail, education, and an innovative economy. There is a sense that the prisons are stepping stones, contributing to near term economic stability while other businesses are attracted or, more likely, grown and developed by current residents, businesses, and institutions.

There is an interest in seeing that bio-fuels, hydro power, wind power and other power sources need to be coupled with training programs at the community college so as to create a new economic cluster focused on alternative energy in Berlin.

People envision Berlin's easy access to the renewable energy of the northern forests becoming a way to make the city's remoteness from major population centers an asset once again.

There is a sense that all of this new activity will mean a larger population for Berlin, with new homes being built within the city limits, allowing the City to more readily support the infrastructure that was developed previously for a more populous community. The additional residents and the new tax base from business are envisioned as providing tax relief for all.

Efforts will have been made to secure rapid, inexpensive Internet service (or whatever succeeds it) throughout the community and throughout the Valley and the county, giving rise to an entrepreneurial economy that is attracted to the area by its outstanding natural resources and recreational opportunities.

The Mill Site will have been successfully redeveloped!

There remains today considerable controversy regarding what "successfully redeveloped" actually means at the site of the former pulp mill site. Since 2007 there has been a private proposal to redevelop the remaining recovery boiler and its adjacent 300' smokestack as a 60 megawatt bio-fuel boiler. In survey questions that focused on this proposal approximately one third of the respondents favored it strongly, about a sixth felt that this type of industrial development here was not an important issue, and the remaining respondents were somewhat neutral. Similar results were obtained at the various public forums.

Because of the size of the bio-fuel proposal, if it does ultimately go forward, its licensing and permitting will be by the State of New Hampshire. The City and citizens can and should have input to the State's Site Evaluation Committee, but that is where the licensing authority will rest. Given that fact, the visioning process focused on broader questions of the site's development, not specifically on the bio-fuel proposal.

This area is envisioned as a multiple use area with a much greener landscape than it had during its previous use as a log yard and pulp mill. There should be multiple uses here, perhaps including light manufacturing, offices, some commercial (to complement the Downtown, not compete with it), and maybe even some housing. All parties recognized that the views from this site to the northern Presidential Range and Mount Washington are outstanding.

There should be access to the Androscoggin River here via walking paths. A network could be developed on both sides of the river, with the Cleveland, Mason Street, Bridge Street, and Twelfth Street Bridges being the connecting links. Along these paths there should be interpretive information available about the site's previous use and the culture of the community that developed around it. Any remaining historic buildings should be restored as interpretive sites.

By 2030 it is hoped that the remaining contamination from the mill activity will have been cleaned up. This site should not be the focus of heavy industry anymore, because of its close proximity to the developed portions of the city. Business activity here will have been designed to minimize its impact on surrounding properties.

If an energy facility is ultimately developed here or near here, its heat and steam byproducts should be used to heat adjacent properties, including new businesses on the Mill Site and in the Downtown.

Summary

Most of all, there was a sense through out the visioning process that Berlin is a special community in a very beautiful location. Yes, it is somewhat remote, but that has actually knit a stronger, more interactive community. There is hope that with the changes noted, Berlin will be the place to be in the North Country, a center for a new northern entrepreneurial culture that is a place of pride for older and newer residents alike.