

# Envisioning Convergence

## Final Thoughts about Going Forward

A Note to Readers: Below you will find some of the concluding recommendations made by participants in the November, 2003 gathering. We wish to share them with readers, but we also know they will that recommendations, concerns, and goals for approaches integrating culture, environment and community will change over time. They should.

As work by the FFC and others moves forward, we hope this insert will change periodically as we are able to share updates with readers. We hope you will also add your own final thoughts to this mix.

"There's a new coalescing around community vision," Chuck Fluharty, Director of the University of Missouri's Rural Policy Research Institute, told those who attended the Fund for Folk Culture's conference in November 2003. "Ten years ago none of this was going on." The commons movement has captured the imagination of media reformers, environmentalists, and other critics of the market who are defending the public domain against encroaching commercialization and advancing a positive vision. And communities are farther along than is recognized. "Though they may not use the terms we do," said Jon Bailey of the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Nebraska, "they know their current economic system can't survive. Intuitively they know they're losing their schools, kids, and traditions. If we say, 'bring it all together,' there will be a receptive audience. What people don't know is that there could be support for a holistic approach."

But how to build that support?

### Taking Vibrant Local Efforts to Scale

In attempting to answer that basic question, those drawn together by the Fund for Folk Culture proposed four strategies to begin building a support system for the idea of "place" as the frame within which to balance economic, environmental, and cultural interests, stressing the need for humility in working with legislators, developers, and communities. The strategies they outlined would not create a hierarchical "distribution system," but a way to come to local and regional understandings and build relationships.

- Get organized and active politically.

Identifying key issues that have an out-sized impact on culture, the environment, and livelihood is a necessary first step. Once they are identified, cultural and economic impact statements should raise issues of equity and justice, arguing for a "congruence of place, local government, and community interests as a first step toward getting a national place-based policy that will be concerned with the division of powers among federal, state, and local interests."<sup>1</sup>

Holistic responses to problems exist, but need visibility and shape through the development of compelling stories and insightful research. Strategic alliances

should be developed among existing networks to address such issues. Finding supporters in legislatures and Congress, to whom these arguments can be made, is obviously essential.

- Identify and carry out joint projects around shared interests, ideas, or practices to create a network of engaged intermediaries.

Among the ideas proposed: exchanges between New Mexico and the Northern Forest of New England, or communities at the headwaters and mouth of rivers; gatherings of culture-bearers to promote "healing in place;" and developing a culture and place-based curriculum for elementary school students.

Efforts should also be made to engage university research agendas to identify stumbling blocks, especially in policy. Why is culture excluded from environmental stewardship and economic development, for example? Millions are spent on the latter. Other good topics: new forms of land ownership that center on community partnerships, or the potential synergies between rural and urban markets – i.e., identifying demand in urban areas for products that are locally developed in rural communities.

- Create a "toolbox" of resources.

A resource toolbox should offer lessons learned from joint projects; include guides on how to do asset inventories and cultural surveys that can lead to a new kind of "community ethnography," as well as participatory research; and describe models that move beyond stereotypes – examples of effective development that are "sanctuaries" where culture can be seen as "healing in place."

- Develop and execute an on-going, integrated communications plan.

Finally, a communications plan is crucial to correct erroneous impressions of rural circumstances, to reorient people toward place-based, holistic community and economic development, and to reframe the debate around what is just, valuable, and sustainable. It must be multi-form, multi-lingual, and reach beyond English. Communications must also be clear: people have a limited capacity for ambiguity. In the Southwest, food-based projects are being used to carry the "meta-message." Creating a database of stories that illustrate the value of a holistic approach would be an invaluable tool to show rather than tell, and could be made available to broadcasters, photographers, and documentarians. Intermediary organizations can gather such stories, as well as business plans for vibrant local enterprises, and serve as clearinghouses for best practices.

They can also help get the message out. The Association of Small Cities and Counties, the Alliance of National Heritage Areas, the Rural Policy Research Institute, among others, can help "pick the right fights" and host convenings. Simply inviting cultural practitioners to meetings focused on the environment or sustainable livelihoods is a good first step.