Oxford County Community Conversation Notes
Bethel Chamber Breakfast at Bethel Inn Resort
June 29, 2016

1. **What is your vision for Oxford County?**
   - Oxford is the #1 healthiest and safest county in Maine
   - All residents feel valued and respected
   - Everyone feels self worth and does not feel isolated
   - Excellent example of an age-friendly community in rural and remote Maine
   - Entrepreneurial hotbed and thriving small businesses supported by higher education
   - Stellar public schools
   - Welcoming—economically and socially—to immigrants
   - Good, high-paying jobs for residents
   - Vast, inter-connected trail system
   - All children have access to high-quality day care and health consultants
   - Greater energy and food self-sufficiency
   - Tourist attraction year round
   - Better transportation access to those in poverty
   - Recognition and preservation of a unique, great way of life
   - A place where we can address all addictions and substance abuse and reduce stigma so people can get into recovery
   - Attractive place for young people to stay and come to
   - Strong rural economy and downtown
   - Everyone has access to good education—from preschool to post-secondary opportunities within 100 miles from home
   - Support for adult learners and opportunities for retraining (including transportation and child care)
   - Access to arts, culture, museums
   - All residents have opportunities for education and training to improve their futures (education and training are separate concepts)

2. **What are the greatest strengths of communities in Oxford County?**

- Deep connection to natural landscape
- People care about communities and want them to grow
- Strong community action programs
- We preserve architectural beauty (no chain stores)—draws tourists looking for authentic "New England village"
- There's not too many people—smaller populations stay more connected to the land and keeps out big chain stores
- The talent, energy, and caring of the people
- There's so much to do here (especially outside)
- Natural resources: forest/timber, food production, mineral wealth
- Resiliency of the people and communities
- Sunday River
- Coalitions—strong volunteer networks across towns
- Strong cultural and artistic heritage
- History of collaboration
- Grassroots efforts and new ways to get things done
- Topography of lakes and mountains
- Growth of young farmers and local food network
- Two paper mills with 1,500 jobs in the mill and the multiplier effect—this money stays in the county

3. **What are the greatest challenges of communities in Oxford County?**
   - Gaining a more diversified economy
   - Public transportation, especially for aging and disabled
   - Structurally weak county government
   - Funding for full spectrum of education
   - Affordable and safe housing
   - Poor broadband connectivity
   - Education needs to be for the 21st century
   - High drug and alcohol use, but no treatment centers
   - Stigma of substance abuse—addiction is a family disease, not just an individual's
   - Need more livable wages and jobs—serious economic disparities
   - Hallowing out of the middle class
   - Limited economic opportunities for immigrants
   - Lack critical mass of people (workforce for companies to locate here)
   - Few people over large land area
   - Need stronger public education system to keep and attract young families
   - Reaching those who are less involved/engaged
   - Generational poverty

- Shrinking birth rates, education population. In the 1990s, the grade schools had enrollments of 17,000; now, it's 14,000. They've had teacher layoffs as a result. Only 35 babies a day are born in Maine.
- Elderly leaving to avoid estate taxes
- Need other jobs outside of tourism to welcome others
- Shrinking state funding
- Income inequality
- Profound divide between Us and Them—by income, by full-time residents v. tourists/summer folks, by productive economy (natural resources) v. consumptive economy (services)
- Need zoning laws to protect historic architecture
- Shortage of health care providers, especially mental health

4. **How can we build on those strengths and address those challenges?**
- Work together as a community on collaborative efforts
- Zoning ordinances can help
- Work to reduce the stigma of substance abuse
- Share resources among nonprofits
- Develop community connections around education, employment, health, substance abuse, income inequality, infrastructure—Heart and Soul project will enable storytelling to help bridge divides
- Public/private partnerships—Gould, Telstar, 4-H—for example, Gould has good technology and recreation space (make available to seniors?); business partners could participate in Contractor Day at Telstar
- Age-friendly issues: rail and bus access, resource directory of services, rural Uber, Norway bike share needs 3-wheel bikes for older people
- Education—identify assets we have (3 education resources with different approaches: outdoors, entrepreneurship, trades)—build into different models of education
- Bridge school and community—more community involvement, especially at middle school
- Access to broadband internet is critical
- Think regionally (not only county)—Oxford County could reach across state and international boundaries for new opportunities
- Destination tourism—especially for younger people