NELF Chat Notes
July 21, 2020

Announcement: NELF Chat will take August off, resume in September!

Notes:

1. Welcome & check-in summary: Relatively low COVID numbers in New England is providing temporary relief, bandwidth to focus on other things, for example it is hotter than it should be in VT right now & human modifications to the landscape exacerbate the heat in some communities. People are traveling more and COVID numbers will go up again. There are hard decisions to be made and no perfect solutions.
2. Presentation by Lucy: July NELF Lunch Chat: Redlining in New England, recorded and available on YouTube. See PDF of slide deck here.
    a. Redlining was a mortgage lending management practice, enacted in New Deal legislation with the intention of preventing foreclosures and stabilizing housing. 48+ New England cities were graded according to racist criteria under the National Housing Act of 1934.
    b. Maps overlay: Redlining and tree canopy - more trees in greenlined areas, fewer in redlined areas.
    c. Maps overlay: Redlining and Opportunity Atlas map – inequity magnified
    d. Takeaways - redlining & NELF maps:
        i. There is variation across redlined cities. Different scales & specifics of NELF models muddle the signal.
        ii. Redlined areas are frequently devoid of large forested areas
        iii. Disproportionately *high density* development, often consists of or is adjacent to industrial development

3. Discussion:
   Connected Communities represents one possible future rooted in valuing the land and centering local community needs.
    - What potential does Connected Communities have to exacerbate or alleviate impacts of redlining?
    - What other considerations are needed or are relevant?

    a. Looking at Connected Communities - VT as an example of balancing communities and conservation? Important to pay attention to what is happening in cities too and what can be done within New England's urban areas.
    b. Could the scenarios inadvertently create "urban sacrifice zones" and how can we avoid that? For example: Attitudes in Hartford – more affluent West Hartford residents advocate speak up, implication can be that their part of the city is the best & most worthy, that attitude creates a willingness to have local "sacrifice zones."
    c. Idea: revisit scenarios to determine what the positive values and actions are.

i. Yankee Cosmopolitan - there should be a positive there, but it screams inequity on steroids.
ii. Smart growth has been turned to infill. We need to revisit values and priorities around which smart growth actions are planned and implemented. Smart growth can undermine nature in cities. Ex: The focus on infill and walkability and front porches means parking in back, takes away backyards, green space, backyard birding.
iii. The dogma is that people move to the suburbs because of “security” and “schools.” But a lot of people move to suburbs to get to trees and nature.

d. “Vermont ideal” and VT’s challenges related to connected communities:
i. Heat islands. In Burlington, Brattleboro, Middlebury, Springfield. Bennington. Old mill towns, deforested, there are dangerous heat islands, all the way up to Montreal, it is getting dangerously hot in some of the old northern New England cities.
ii. Urban trees & forest pests: Tree planting in New England cities means people are selecting species but not always planning for resilience. St. Johnsbury was once named one of the most beautiful small towns in the U.S., the downtown trees were elms and now they’re gone. Now Stowe VT has a beautiful downtown, and the street trees are all ash. We need to be thinking a lot about tree planting in urban communities. Tree planting can help reduce inequity in neighborhoods but don’t plant all one kind of tree.
iii. Trails and greenbelts are the skeletal structure that connect people in a community. How people get from a to b, school to home; workplace to home. If people can do it safely by walk and bike, that increases livability. Think less about zoning and more about muscle-powered connectivity as a livability metric. In areas with less development pressure it is really easy to plan trails and bikeways because land is inexpensive and available. But in very developed areas (ex: Chittenden County) easement opportunities have been missed, and acquiring the land to make trails and bikeways is very expensive.
iv. Within communities, basic lessons about COVID, like tracking demographic along with COVID testing, and working with communities to provide COVID public health and safety information in multiple languages and with culturally relevant messages.
v. VT has a big summer tourism industry, increasing vulnerability to super-spreader events. VT developed guidelines based on COVID rates – they coded a map based on virus prevalence, green, yellow, and red counties, with different quarantine requirements for people traveling from each color. The purpose of the policy is to save lives; the only variable considered when making the map was COVID rate. If you overlay the travel restrictions map with a demographic map, the travel restrictions are correlated with race.

e. Reminder that urban design and livability is important for the conservation movement & protecting special places.
f. Bicycle trails are important and should be developed using already paved areas, especially in cities: re-purpose & reclaim pavement. Trails should NOT bulldoze natural areas especially in cities where there are so few green spaces left.
g. Bike trails & conservation, ex: Farmington Canal trail - it is a DOT funded project; they are essentially building a 1 lane road. It is up to the communities around the trail to protect it.
    i. Here is a value for Connected Communities: Put bike trails in places that buffer riparian habitat to conserve riparian zones (do NOT put trails *in* the riparian zone).
h. In areas with a lot of pavement, the win-win is reclaiming paved space and turning it into green space.
    i. Conserve green ribbons, don't shred green them!
    ii. We need to reclaim green corridors from the vehicular corridors
    iii. Anywhere we have to cut mature trees in urban areas to make a bike path is a net loss.
i. When building the bike trail, balance objectives like creating shade and enhancing a natural area with the need for visibility, well list, safety & security for trails in cities.
j. A piece for Connected Communities is DEPAVING. In places where there is too much pavement and not enough trees, the amount of pavement is not sustainable (ex: pavement creates heat islands).
k. Add a third axis or overlay for the scenario matrix.
    i. Scenarios need something that captures wellbeing. For example if you plan a Connected Communities future but you have no trees, how do you cross-check that with the scenarios? Is the third axis "goodness" "equity" "property value" to capture wellbeing. Also: Diversity. Desirability. Beauty. Charming-ness. Poverty Rate. Disaster Preparedness. Food system resiliency. Fossil fuel reliance. Policies like redlining, zoning.
l. Some values don't fall neatly within these four quadrants.
m. A spreadsheet or wiki could be used to integrate complex topics.