

## Linking Lands and Communities – Lessons Learned

We have learned many things throughout the course of this project! The entire process took longer than we thought or wished it would. Because it was the first comprehensive regional land-based plan done in and for this four-county region since the mid-1970s and because we chose a process that was very community focused, it took time to discuss the project with people and get a diverse group of people involved. The project was also “custom designed” for this region based on regional values and sensitivities. We (staff, Leadership Group, Science Team and work groups) designed our own process for choosing which resources to focus on, how to map and value lands related to these resources, how to combine all the information into a regional network and how to share the information with the broader community.

Listed below are some of the key things we learned that will hopefully help others interested in undertaking a similar project.

### 1. **Develop Clear Goals for the Green Infrastructure Network**

We were extremely successful at bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to participate in the project in various ways (i.e., Leadership Group, Resource Assessment working groups, Development and Transportation groups). That being said, there were many conflicting values among them, and we were pulled off course a few times trying to address everyone’s concerns and keep people at the table. The biggest example of this was the push of the group to incorporate economic development into the green infrastructure network. While staff recognized the value of economic development and the patterns of growth, we ended up going in circles trying to bring ED and Development into the fold, and in the end, returned back to our original approach (green infrastructure network as opposed to a conservation and development network). Setting clear goals for what the GI Network would and would not include at the beginning of the project may have resulted in a more efficient and time-saving process.

### 2. **Is our product “the answer” – or a planning tool?**

We began the LLC project thinking that we would create a single GI network map for the region that would represent a consensus of regional values on our natural resources. We came to realize that our models were tools to which local communities, counties, land trusts, developers and landowners can apply their own values, coming out with conservation and development solutions that fit their particular needs and wishes. Some users will choose to use the maps and models “as is,” incorporating them into their planning and/or decision-making processes.

### 3. **Post-project Responsibilities**

“Owners” of a Linking Lands-type project should plan ahead for all or some of the following post-project responsibilities:

- Access to maps, GIS data, documentation, etc. (including disclaimers and terms of use)

- Support – a “help desk” to answer questions and provide technical assistance on the above products
- Training on how to use the maps, GIS data, implementation toolkit, etc.
- Maintenance & updating of maps, reports, website, data coverages
- Consulting services for member governments or other regions wishing to conduct an LLC-like project

#### 4. **Differentiate between development and economic development**

As we compiled the different suggestions around economics of land, etc. – we realized an important distinction: the difference between “**development**” (i.e., the “footprint” of urbanization in the region + the associated practices by which that development is accomplished and managed) – and “**economic development**” (i.e., a proactive process of trying to stimulate the growth of certain economic sectors for job and wealth creation in the region). While Linking Lands has never been about such proactive economic development (ED), we have heard from several quarters – particularly some of our member local governments – that they would like to see an ED focus in Linking Lands.

#### 5. **Scientists and Modelers are different animals**

We learned this lesson by trying to create a conceptual model for our Water Resources Assessment with a Science Team comprised mainly of agency scientists, representing a variety of disciplines and specialties. It was not until RENCI and A Carroll GIS got involved in the assessments that we realized the value of decision-support and GIS modeling expertise. The level of GIS analysis needed for the project was a lot more complex than we realized at the start of the project.

#### 6. **Engage resource specialists/experts for each resource assessment**

The Science Team chose to begin with developing an assessment of Water Resources which included Water Quality, Water Quantity and Water Consumption. One thing staff and partners learned during this process was that having a broad-based Science Team was not the most efficient or valid way to perform specialized resource assessments. As the water resources assessment was wrapping up, staff decided to form more specialized work groups to work on the other assessments. This worked out well and the other assessments were completed in a shorter timeframe, with more efficient use of everyone’s time.

#### 7. **Data, Values and Transparency**

We learned the importance of the relationship between values and data and the role of values in our resource assessments. Our models are about applying values to data. We attempted to apply scientific values (economic values in the case of agriculture) to the data in modeling our resource assessments. We also realized the importance of transparently communicating the values that drove the assessments and ultimately the GI network.

#### **8. Difficulties assessing farming and forestry together in one assessment**

Farms and forests are often combined on agricultural parcels, with a variety of farming and forestry activities occurring on them. Also, the 2001 National Land Cover Dataset (NLCD) data have been derived from photos shot from a satellite. When the camera picks up trees or tree canopies, it labels those areas as forested. Though an area may be depicted as forest in this data layer, it may or may not have the other characteristics necessary to support forestry practices. For example, it may be too small of a parcel, it may be in the midst of a residential development, or it may not have the appropriate infrastructure necessary to support forestry-related practices. Thus it is important that we show the extent of forest resources within the region, but recognize that this does not necessarily mean that these forestlands rank highly for forestry activities.

Due to the extensive forest cover in the region, the forests data layer covers about 70% of the entire map. Because the data layers are stacked on top of one another based on their rank, if forests had a higher rank then this layer would cover all the layers beneath it – making them invisible.

#### **9. Find additional ways to engage local governments on the front end of the project**

From the beginning, we knew that involving staff from local governments from around the region was important. We certainly made efforts to educate them about the green infrastructure planning process and the values and services associated with sustaining healthy ecosystems. However, as the project went on, we had less and less involvement and many local government representatives seemed to become disconnected from the project. Looking back, we could have done a better job really selling the project and its benefits to the counties and listening to their feedback earlier in the process. More one-on-one meetings, focus groups, and presentations early on may have helped to address concerns and allay fears sooner, resulting in more involvement and support the project and its products.

#### **10. County & municipal scale versus regional scale planning**

In the May 2007 meeting with local government and state planners, the planners suggested that we consider taking advantage of ongoing local planning processes by inserting green infrastructure planning into those processes, as an alternative to a regional (four county) process. The theory was that the local planning processes would provide an existing vehicle for GI planning, and we could avoid having to create an entirely new regional process involving the same communities. Conversely, our GI planning could add value to the local projects, and enable our cities, towns and counties to avoid an extra set of regional planning meetings.

Ultimately we found that due to timing, perceptions of redundancy, or lack of interest, the counties weren't quite ready to build the GI planning methodology directly into their planning processes. Our hope was that the regional project would help them to become more comfortable with the process and give them time to see where and how the GI methodology could support the work they were already doing (without starting a whole

new planning process). As we enter into the next phase of training and implementation, we will re-explore opportunities for applying the new regional GI network to county planning efforts.

**11. Elect a chairperson who is not staff**

It may have been useful to have a chair that is not a staff person – to be an ambassador and speaker. It would be ideal if it was an elected official.