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Nancy Potter

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My classification is Assistant Director and Issue Leader for Family and Community Well-Being. The assistant director part is a Tompkins County association-wide responsibility that I have held for the last four or five years.

INTERVIEWED BY

Kim Niewolny

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The other half of my job is the Issue Leader for Family and Community Development, a component of Family & Community Well-Being. This marks my 23rd year as an Extension educator. Extension allows me to be active with the community. What keeps me here is that my job changes. People keep changing, and the community keeps changing. It is always interesting. It's a fresh job everyday. It keeps me motivated.

Extension's role is to constantly be looking ahead at what the issues in the community are, to look for opportunities for an educational response, intervention, or some sort of education that can have an impact on an issue. It's all about figuring out what the goals of the community are, *with* the community. That is historically how I see Cooperative Extension's role. It's what we have carved out as our niche in the community. We bring research and practices together, so they can be part of local discussion and action.

This organization—Tompkins County-Cornell Cooperative Extension (TC-CCE)—has been one that takes a lead getting people together organizing around



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an issue, helping them to see how something different could happen, how a positive change could take place. If that change makes a positive impact, and the community wants to continue it, then we try to spin it off or find a way to sustain it so we can go on to the next issue or opportunity. There is this constant flow of “get in there, work with it, pull people together, find out what is going on,” so that we can make a difference by bringing together the resources and the strengths of the community with the research of the university. Sometimes it is just a short-term effort, and sometimes it takes years.

I strive for longevity in program development; *Parents Apart*®: *Helping Children Cope with Separation and Divorce* is one example. TC-CCE started this demonstration research and extension project in 1997 with a broad community collaboration. We then passed

it on to a collaborator who now manages the program. *Parents Apart*® helps parents understand the impact of this family transition and to add to their parenting skills. It was designed to help them parent separately in a way that helps their children grow in healthy ways. They also learn how to keep their children out of the middle of the adults’ conflict. There was a strong desire for it to continue and we passed it on and are still part of the advisory committee. This shows how we look to sustain programs that are effective by developing ways the community can continue them.

Then there was the Small Business Energy Efficiency Program. Through special state funding, we helped coordinate a six-county effort to do energy audits for small businesses, farms, and not-for-profits. Over a period of six years, we found that many thousands of dollars of savings could be accomplished if businesses instituted energy saving recommendations. When that state funding stopped, we didn’t have other resources to continue it. However, utility companies were doing residential audits and they expanded into these other sectors. This is another example of how programs can be sustained.

I find great satisfaction in our efforts when I know there is a lasting impact. It is also an expectation of our funders to see results. About half of our funding comes from taxpayer dollars. Citizens—the taxpayers—deserve to see something for their investment. I feel responsible for that. When we have specific grants that fund projects, funders want to know upfront what our goals and objectives are. If the program’s objectives don’t work out, funders want to know why; we want to know why, too!

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It's interesting how I came to Extension. I didn't wake up one day, and say, "Oh, I think I would like to be an Extension educator." I came from a rural community where I grew up on a dairy farm and was involved in 4-H. My mother was hired as an Extension educator with 4-H home economics in Cortland County when she graduated from college. Cortland County was where she ended up falling in love with and marrying my father. He had started a farm there. My parents were active as 4-H volunteer leaders and they were both part of 4-H when they were growing up. They grew up on farms, and the 4-H system offered them opportunities to learn new things, to go to new places, to connect statewide, and even connect nationally with other youth. It was a great system for them; it was a relatively young national organization at that time. So I grew up around the whole Cooperative Extension notion. It's kind of like being a preacher's kid: 4-H and Cooperative Extension were part of our family life!

I didn't really know what direction my professional life would take when I graduated from high school. I applied to colleges between my junior and senior year, and I also applied to be a Rotary exchange student. Rotary International is a service organization with an exchange student system for high school students to live a year in another country. Part of their mission is international understanding and peace, along with local community service. When I was accepted, I opted to be a Rotary exchange student and postpone college for a year.

I traveled to the second largest city in Costa Rica. It wasn't really large, but I was living in a city for the first time. This experience was an important part of my development because that year I discovered how similar community is in different parts of the world. I realized the strong sense of community that the family I lived with there had. It wasn't the whole city, but they had a strong network of family and friends. Plus, in the central park in the evenings, people would walk around and connect with each other. It was all of this community interaction with the shopkeepers, the market place, and the hustle and bustle of it all that I thought was phenomenal. It was a wonderful experience: the threads of community, the value of people working and living and playing together. My own community, a rural farming community, had similar networks. It was the '50s and '60s and everybody looked out for everybody else's kids. If you got into trouble, your parents knew it before you got home. It was a pretty close-knit community.

I came back from Costa Rica and went to Cornell as an undergraduate. I studied Community Service Education in the College of Human Ecology, which was in transition at the time from the College of Home Economics. Thinking that education was important, I concentrated in human development with an emphasis on adult education. I realized that I did not have a real passion for teaching in public

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schools or any kind of formal system. This led me to a non-formal education route.

I did an internship in my senior year with Extension educators here in Tompkins County. I didn't feel I did anything exceptional or anything outstanding, but I received a lot of positive feedback from my advisors at Cooperative Extension and my professor for the internship course. It made a very big difference in what I decided to do. It was the first time that I had a sense that what felt so ordinary and normal to me was in someone else's eyes a talent; that was really helpful feedback.

I graduated and went off to VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America, now under Americorps*VISTA). VISTA is the domestic Peace Corps and was created as part of the War on Poverty. Americorps now recruits youth out of high school to be volunteers, and VISTA recruits college graduates and older volunteers. I spent a year with a neighborhood legal project in Fort Wayne, Indiana. It was not what you would think of as the center of poverty, but there was some extreme poverty. I was assigned to a neighborhood community organizing project. I thought, "What is community organizing? I don't know what I'm doing." I talked to people and listened to them. I found out what their issues and dreams were. There was a neighborhood association made up of homeowners, renters, citizens, businesses, and neighborhood leaders. I was basically their hands and feet for a year to help get things done.

Some of my VISTA training was in Chicago. It was the end of the Saul Alinsky-style of VISTA community organizing. I got a taste of the more radical type of organizing, and knew that wasn't my style. Yet I was real excited about citizens' voices being heard. My best friend in college said, "Nancy, you went off to VISTA and came back cynical." I was much more questioning of our national policies, for example, the Vietnam War, and realized I needed to find ways to be actively involved.

VISTA gave me some grounding about what some of the issues were for communities. The VISTA experience was great because I was seeing what was happening from the community's perspective. It was blue-collar and grassroots, not a college or intellectual environment. As a VISTA volunteer I could say, "I am one of you and I am willing to help, but I am going to be gone. It's your community. It's what you want to see happen that's really important." It was a very special year. Ours was one of the last of VISTA's community organizing efforts. This type of grassroots organizing was phased out of VISTA's repertoire during the Nixon administration.

I learned a lot from the people who were part of the Nebraska Neighborhood Association in Fort Wayne. They were patient with my ignorance and my naivety, and they helped me learn what I needed when I needed to know it, so I could be a part of the change. There were individuals in that group who were not daunted;

they knew their community could be better. They wanted to do something for the youth, so the youth didn't have time to vandalize the neighborhood. The people of that community wanted to see their kids grow up to be responsible adults. The group also wanted to have a voice in some City Hall policies. The banks had redlined their area because it was in a flood zone. So there were big issues they were dealing with and these residents wanted to do something. It's the people who care and make the commitment—those people are the heroes. They are the *real* heroes.

After VISTA, I went to the Albany area and had another pivotal moment. I had two interviews, one day after the other. One was for a 4-H position, an urban 4-H project. The other was with the Girl Scouts. I basically knew nothing about the Girl Scouts, but I had grown up with 4-H. The 4-H position had had six people in five years. The Girl Scout position was presented in such a way that showed how the system, and the organization, was really there to support the volunteer leaders and the girls in the program. It really appealed to me.

I accepted the Girl Scout Council position. It was a time in my life when I said, "You know, I have never done this." I'd never been involved in this program, so it was time I found out about it. I needed to see what it was offering to the girls,

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the volunteers, and the communities. I was there from 1975–78, a little over three years. I started in a position working in neighborhoods with volunteer leaders, supporting them in their role as Girl Scout leaders. And I was getting leadership training! A couple years later I was program director council-wide. I was doing "Train the Trainer" projects and working with some awesome people. It was a great experience

learning about adult learning, training, and facilitation.

I left the Girl Scout position after three years because I had a love and he was building a house in Tompkins County. So I decided to move. It was heart wrenching in lots of ways. I had become enmeshed in the community there through a faith community, the Girl Scout community, and through a great network of friends. It wasn't easy for me to leave these communities; I had connected with them so easily.

I moved back to the Ithaca area and found a position as an administrative assistant for nine months on the Cornell campus. Then a position with TC-CCE opened up and I applied. There were some experienced Extension educators in the pool, so I just applied for a lark. When they called and offered me the position, I

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couldn't believe it; that was 23 years ago!

I want to talk about a little project that illustrates the challenges, the joy, and the impact that this job brings. It started as a visioning project in the town of Newfield. Dan Winch, the county board representative for the town of Newfield, approached me and explained that he had been trying over the years to find ways for Newfield to come together to take advantage of some of the things that the county had to offer, say through the county planning department. Dan had really tried to work with the town, and was the spark plug to all of this. He felt badly because there would be grants that the county board had to offer that bypassed Newfield because the town didn't have a strategic plan. He was approving dollars to go to these other communities and Newfield wasn't eligible; they needed a written document that said, "This is what we want to do," such as commercial center revitalization.

Dan and I talked about the work TC-CCE had done in some other communities. There was a project we called Community Links. Community Links was conceived to facilitate a municipality linking with local resources, its own municipality or county, the land-grant university or with whatever resource they needed to develop their plan. We helped facilitate the linking. We did this work in Groton, Caroline, and Jacksonville. Its basic goal is to promote leadership development for building community. That is a mouth full, but it is descriptive of what this is about. It's about local leadership. It's about developing the assets and strengths they have to build their own community. We are interested in pulling people together and helping them determine in what direction or with whom. One of the tasks is to figure out what the vision is—where are they going and what are their goals? In the Community Links project, we asked towns, "Who are the people you would like to bring together? What are the issues on the table? Who is there to help support you working on these issues?"

We selected a couple of communities to start with and Groton was one. They were successful because they pulled together so many key stakeholders: not only individuals, but also the organizations with which they were connected. Examples would be with the superintendent of the school district, the school board, town board, village board, and business associations. They wanted to see this community move forward. They brainstormed. Then there was a wider network of groups and organizations that they invited into that process.

So Dan said, "I want to see this happen in Newfield." Taking the Community Links model, but knowing we had very limited resources, I talked to the Executive Director here at TC-CCE, who is supportive of this kind of community development work. I then connected with Karen, the county planning department circuit

rider. Some of this work looked like a county planning role. However, in meeting with the planning commissioner, and some of the other folks involved, it was clear that they didn't have the staff time to do this kind of "tilling the soil" work in local communities. They had people who would help communities write grants to pursue the goals in their plan, but they really didn't have time to work with the local core group of people to ask, "What would a visioning process look like here?" or "What do you hope would come out of it?"

Dan, Karen, and I sat down with Newfield's town board. We talked with them about what this process had been like in other communities and what they hoped

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for in their community. We worked closely with the town board, asking them what they were concerned about in this process. We asked for their input on an agenda for community meetings. One of their concerns was that there had been a fair amount of conflict in other situations in Newfield. The "Z" word—zoning—had always been a red flag there. There are people who have said, "Over my dead body!" and others who say, "But we have to do something here or we are not going

to have the kind of community that we want to live in." It was a tough situation for the town board.

The town board became more involved in the process. I asked them to list a number of organizations that they were connected to who should know about this and who needs to be invited. There was a diverse list: homeowners, renters, business owners, laborers, people new to town, and people who have been there for years. Part of my role is to say, "Who is missing from the table? Who is missing from this conversation?" or "Who else do we need to hear from?" Their voice is important in creating the future. For me, this is a premise for this kind of work. I think it is for most community developers. That is, to be able to look at who is not there and to be able to ask, "Whose voice is missing?" As an outsider, I can say that because I don't know. I can say very openly and ignorantly, "Who else needs to be here? Who's not here?" So at every community meeting, we asked those questions.

I keep referring to "we." "We" are the people who were facilitating. I did a lot of the facilitating, but I also involved several of the town board members. I sat down with them and said, "Here is a process that we did before. Would this work?"

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The town supervisor welcomed people and did some basic “why are we doing this” explanation, and other members helped with the activities.

The first activity in this process was to list the strengths of the community. We asked people, “What do you like about this community?” In this case, community meant the town of Newfield, as a geographic location. We had people off the tops of their heads and from the tops of their hearts talking about the qualities they liked in the town of Newfield. We had a wonderful list. There was everything from the beautiful hills, to the wildlife, to the little hamlets and the little stores, to the comfort people had with knowing and not knowing people. It didn’t matter what people valued; it was *all* valued. The strengths people mentioned were all listed. This is something I feel strongly about. If people say a word, it is written on the newsprint. There is no changing what they say; *their words* are powerful. Their words mean more to them than I could interpret. I am really sticky about this. How people say things is critical. They hear themselves and when they see it written, it’s a validation that they have been heard, that it’s been recorded. When they see that “my voice” is important in this whole process, that “my voice” makes a difference by being heard, then they are more apt to hear someone else’s voice. In this way, we begin to break down the barriers we make about each other, such as, “I am not going to listen because I know what he or she is going to say.” That is the magic that happened in Newfield.

We did not start out by listing problems. In fact, this whole community-visioning project was not about problems. It was about the future. After we listed the strengths, the activity was “What does Newfield look like in 2010? What are the things you see? What are the physical aspects, the social aspects, and the economic aspects of it?” People wrote their ideas on sticky notes and then put them under one of several categories. I think we even created a miscellaneous category. Then I asked them to divide into three groups and sort the ideas into common themes. For example, on the piece of newsprint that said “physical characteristics” they put all the ideas that had to do with safe streets and sidewalks in one group and put together ideas around land use, such as “maintain an environment that supports water quality.” Then the groups had a chance to label those themes. We spent two and-a-half hours on this community meeting. *They* did the organizing; I just stepped back and let them go.

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In each of the two sessions there were about twenty to thirty people. Later on a summer intern and I went to Newfield's high school government class that every senior is required to take. Young people's input was on the list of 'voices missing' from the community meetings, so we did the same brainstorming and sorting activity with them as well as listing the community's strengths. The activity was shortened to fit the forty-minute class period, but their voices were still heard. Some of it was flippant or out of this world, and that is okay. Another principle from this type of brainstorming that I feel is important is that no idea is tossed out. It's all kept. It's like in the fortune 500 companies' think tanks: some of the wildest ideas become the products of the future. The creative thoughts and ideas start coming together—they start linking different ideas together. It's magical; you never know what is going to come up. So between the two sessions we had about fifty people and then another twenty students. In this community of about five thousand people, seventy people from high school to senior citizen participated. Most importantly, we always asked the question: "Who is not here? Who else do we need to hear from?"

That outreach piece is important. Part of the organizing, which was a group effort, is taking flyers to different places such as the local grocery stores, markets, gas stations, laundromats, trailer parks, and so forth, and posting and mailing them. The town board and organizations were responsible for spreading the word. I put the announcement in the school bulletin and *Newfield News*, the local weekly paper. The *Ithaca Journal* also ran a little piece. Dan and I did a little interview with the *Ithaca Journal* to talk about what was happening. They had followed the Community Links project very closely; they did a lot of good publicity on that. We didn't do as much with the *Ithaca Journal* this time because of changing reporters and their priorities.

The follow-up from the community visioning meetings was a series of meetings for late summer and fall. Everyone who had signed the list at the other community meetings was invited. The community group and I met then in August. I facilitated and we worked with all of those ideas that had been categorized and compiled from the visioning process. We then created a "preferred future statement" from all of the information that community members had provided. It's going back to the strengths of the community, what people value. Questions were asked: "What do we want to preserve? What do we want to create?" or "What is it that needs to be preserved?" To be intentional about what you want to preserve helps people realize what is really important to hang on to. It was important then to be able to ask: "What do we want here? What's the foundation of our community?"

Over the summer, I had been to a workshop with Michael Kinsley from the Rocky Mountain Institute. I went with some colleagues at Cooperative Extension

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and some Enfield planning board members. We learned about a process Michael Kinsley developed for community visioning and action planning, including creating a “preferred future statement.” That resonated with me because it is a lot easier to talk about “What do you prefer for the future?” than “a vision”. So I borrowed from his process that piece of creating a preferred future statement, and also how to evaluate different project action ideas. This latter process helps assess the feasibility of the ideas based on the community’s criteria.

The Newfield group had three follow-up meetings. We met in August and then again in September and October. There were probably fifteen people, sometimes a few more, who came to each of these meetings. We circulated the preferred future statement to everyone again. Then we brainstormed project action ideas to reach the “future” that was discussed. There were a half a dozen or so ideas that emerged: a chamber of commerce, land assets inventory, community center, grant writer, and a health center. This is not a scientific process; the people who are there are setting the agenda. So again, we needed to ask, “Who’s not here?” And, any idea needs a certain critical mass of energy behind it to move. In some regard, as long as an idea is related to the preferred future—the vision—it doesn’t matter if it’s the one idea that “would move everything along.” It’s not always logical, but it’s what people are impassioned about that makes things happen. Some people may say that what this community really needs is something for toddlers or something for senior citizens. Though, if no one comes to work on that, then we’ll move where people are ready to put the energy.

We had a long list of project action ideas, but only six were written up for the group to consider. I copied and distributed those and invited people to the next meeting. At that meeting we did the “Kinsley” evaluation process where we asked another set of thirteen questions. For example: “Does it relate to the preferred future? Is it fair to all concerned? How much energy is it going to take? Are people invested in it? Do you need money from the town, state, or a big corporation? Is the impact neutral, positive, or negative?” They went through each of the project ideas and the group charted their assessments on each of the criteria. They ended up with three action ideas they thought were feasible to move forward. They formed project action committees around economic development, a land asset inventory, and a community center. These groups had their own conveners and they worked together across the projects. The community center group did some work and decided it didn’t have enough momentum to continue, so it is on hold right now. But the others have moved on and done some amazing things.

The economic development one, through the connection it had made with the county planning circuit rider, asked the town board if they would like to have

interns that summer to help them create a strategic plan for commercial center revitalization. The town board said, “Okay.” The economic development project action group worked with them and got some sketches and ideas out. They developed a strategic plan that had the blessing of the town board. It was submitted to county planning. Now they are eligible for the county’s last cycle of grants. They

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are now working on three or four proposals for these small grants of up to \$7500. That is pretty amazing! The economic development group also invited the Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce to talk with them. Following that, they decided they could start their own business association. They now have 45 businesses that are members, and they have a fundraiser on Super Bowl Sunday. The town clerk said to me the other day: “You know Nancy, it’s so great when a new person comes into the community and says, ‘I would like to start a business here. What do I need to know?’ and I can

say, ‘Why don’t you talk to these folks at the Newfield Business Association?’” Instant networking!

The land asset inventory committee has pulled together a first section for a catalog of all the GIS information that is available that can help the town government, school, business developers, and homeowners make decisions. They invited a county planning staff member to do a public GIS demonstration. Out of that, people became interested in maps and what they could do with them. That’s just the tip of the iceberg.

I continued to work with the community on these project action groups. They asked the town board to contract with TC-CCE for my time in coordinating processes with the action groups. I meet with them about every other month; a little bit more often when there is a special project we are working on.

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fascinating. I haven't done formal studies, but we do get feedback that people make new connections. They hear things in new ways. They learn how much everyone cares, even the people who seem to be the most problematic. People really care and that's what's critical.

In the Newfield project, people's view of Extension, and of me as an Extension educator, were fairly neutral. I didn't have an agenda other than seeing the community come together to see what they might create. It's important to not give my opinion. I try to see where my worldview and my perceptions may be steering things one way or the other. I think that is always a challenge. Because I am a resident and taxpayer of the town of Newfield, I had to say, "It is important for you, if I slip out of my facilitator role and into my citizen role, to tell me so I can pull back." I told that to everybody. I was also facilitating at the same time in the town of Enfield. I was clear with both Enfield and Newfield that if I said the other town's name "you call me on that." And they would! It's fun, but it's also real important that they know that I am a human being, too, and I can have this tendency to slip. It's real important for them that I'm clear about my role as facilitator. If it seems like I am pushing things in a certain direction that they don't want to go, they should say, "Hey, wait a minute." And they will.

Our role as educators for TC-CCE is interesting. It's interesting because "Cornell University" is on our letterhead. And yet, we are really seen as part of the local community. Yes, CCE is an educational outreach component of Cornell, New York State's land-grant university. There are direct connections; for example, we have summer interns from the Department of City and Regional Planning or Landscape Architecture. They are working directly from the university. It's a fascinating relationship and so hard to get a handle on because we are not department-based. Rather, we're part of the Cornell Cooperative Extension system, and our role is to be educators in "the field" and relate back to various faculty members. We are a link with university resources that is once-removed.

As a facilitator in community development with a connection to Cornell, it gives me an opportunity to take from the best of the university. There is tremendous research and tremendous talent in the faculty and Extension staff at Cornell.

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I have learned from them through in-service workshops, intensive training, and by simply going to them directly to get ideas. But my talent, and my domain, is to work with local communities, so I don't have to get involved in university and department politics. (Although, that does affect what happens in our larger system.) There are enough local politics here with the county, towns, and municipalities, as well as the "turf" issues between different organizations. I need to attend to all that to find ways that we can be catalysts here with people from the community. The university and local communities are both valuable. I am trying to bring these two pots of expertise together so the local

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In another capacity with the Tompkins County Coalition for Families, I invite faculty researchers to dialog with us about their work. The Coalition involves mostly colleagues in health, human services, and education. Many are working with families with very limited resources and families who are having challenges. I invite researchers whose work relates to the Coalition's broader goal: to build a supportive community for *all* families. We learn about the latest research, and we exchange perspectives on the issues. By bringing researchers in to talk about what they know about, what they know best, and what they are learning from their work, they help us to think outside the box. We learn what some of the resources are and we then know how to make our work with families more effective. It is so valuable to have access to that rich research and to the people who are doing the research for our professional development with the community.

Thinking back over my career to about ten years ago, I wonder: how did I look at my job back then? Some of it is the same, but a lot of it has evolved to this place of knowing that education can be about facilitating and learning versus the classic: "Here I am. I have some knowledge and I want to share it with you. I want to impart this knowledge to you because it could improve your life." What is a facilitator if she or he doesn't help some process happen? All I am doing is helping people discover each other's passions; it's about knowing when to be there, knowing when to nudge, when to back off, and to know that you never know.

When I kept asking in the Groton Community Links project, "What are the questions you have? What other information do you need before you talk to the

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state legislators about finding funds?”, a wise person said to me: “Nancy, we’ve been working on this problem for the past 23 years. *We are impatient and we’re ready to go!*” Almost taken aback, I said, “Are you really ready to go?” He answered, “Yes, we’re ready!” So I said, “You’re going! You’re going!” What more did they need? They had enough background and they had a clear vision. If they had more questions, they would have to do more homework. They ended up “magically” receiving half a million state Department of Transportation dollars to re-pave and re-curb their Main Street and redo the sidewalks. Not bad for a little town and a few meetings!