Why are we here?

We are here because New Hampshire and the Northern New England region are demographically unbalanced. New Hampshire is now the nation's second-oldest state in median age. The number of elderly residents is growing, while the number of children is decreasing.

The result is fewer children in our schools, fewer students entering higher education, and widespread shortages of workers and community volunteers. This unbalancing has not been accidental, but the result of local development policies that favored age 55+ housing and excluded families with children. This project looks at the ways in which we can rebalance our human ecology.

What can be done?

The primary task is to show local leaders how good outcomes arise from no longer believing in the myths that more children will only increase local school taxes and that older residents will cost nothing. Replacing those myths with facts and new action plans will put us on the path to healthier towns and cities.

Where is positive change happening, and can it be replicated elsewhere? Research for the book and film found examples of people all around New Hampshire working to bring a greater diversity in housing for all ages and income levels and to bust stubborn myths about school-tax costs and land-use policies. The results include rejuvenation of downtowns and the creation of lively new businesses in restored historic buildings. Younger people are stepping up to leadership roles, and other groups are finding ways to work together to achieve their goals.

1)   Upper Valley—major employers, nonprofits and municipalities team up

- What impressed you most about the Upper Valley partnerships highlighted in the segment?

- What would it take to bring people, businesses, organizations and others together to solve similar problems in your area? For example, is it possible to create more affordable and diverse housing choices, help students connect with employers and discover career opportunities in their own town or region?

- Can more regional collaboration resolve issues and create new opportunities in your area?

- What ideas for attracting and keeping young people for the Upper Valley may be useful in other regions or communities around the state?

2)   Keene – a new generation of civic leaders runs for local office

- What inspired you most about the Keene story?

- What are some ways we can be more inclusive, encourage and support more diverse representation in our community organizations, nonprofits and local government?

- What are some of the new ideas of young civic leaders that would also have appeal for an older age demographic? What ideas from Keene might work in other communities?

3)   Mount Washington Valley—Conway adopts citizens' workforce housing ordinance

- Were you surprised by the outcome of the Conway workforce housing ordinance?

- How can local officials (select boards or planning boards) and supporters of more affordable housing options collaborate to find practical solutions in your community?

- What other factors, in addition to housing, would make the Mount Washington Valley or your area more attractive and accessible and for young adults and families?

COMMUNITIES &
CONSEQUENCES II

Rebalancing New Hampshire's Human Ecology
Discussion Guide

Book by Lorraine Merrill & Peter Francese
Documentary by Jay Childs
Produced in partnership with NH PBS

4) 	Pelham—town voted out age-restricted (age 55 or older) housing

• 	What was your biggest takeaway from the Pelham story?

• 	Is it unreasonable for people to expect to live in some proximity to their work? Why or why not?

• 	Many housing advocates say that permitting more housing units per acre of land allows for more efficient land use, conserves resources and reduces cost per unit. Why is increased density for age-restricted housing acceptable - but not for workforce or affordable housing for all ages?

• 	What does Pelham Town Planner Jeff Gowan mean when he says the town was 	committing "long-term suicide"? What ideas for reducing age 55 plus housing and attracting young people may be helpful in other towns around the state?

5) 	Bradford—young people return to their roots to create opportunities for themselves and their neighbors.

• 	How did the responses from older residents affect the success of the younger generation's efforts to create a new economic and civic engine in Bradford?

• 	Could intergenerational collaboration work to solve problems in your community?

• 	What are some new ideas for revitalizing more rural communities that do not have a "major" employer? Expand on Hanna's comment that they saw lack of economic opportunity as a challenge, but also a solution to build their own economic opportunity.

• 	What ideas for attracting and keeping young people for Bradford are applicable to other regions or communities around the state?

• 	How does the present reality create a sense of urgency?

The coronavirus pandemic has made everyone more aware of the vital importance of "essential workers" to the health and well-being of our families, our communities and our economy.

But many essential workers—those employed in health care, elder care and emergency response, food and agriculture, retail, transportation, building trades and more—are precisely the people who struggle to afford housing in our communities.

The pandemic has also led many affluent urban-dwellers to seek safety through buying homes in suburban and rural areas of Northern New England— thus driving up prices in many real-estate markets in the region and making it even harder for ordinary workers to find an affordable home.

Next action steps:
Is there anyone in your town or city who reminds you of one of the individuals featured in the film or book? What are they doing to make your town more welcoming to people of all ages? What support do they need? Can you describe one action you can take to help them?

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