

Economic Recovery in a Rural Maine Community

In 1993, Limestone, a town of 9,900 located in northeastern Maine, was threatened by the Base Closure and Realignment Commission's (BRAC) de-commissioning of Loring Air Force Base. Loring had been the backbone of the local economy for 40 years. Residents were reeling. The closure meant an 80% decrease in population (to 1,900), an equivalent decrease in state revenue sharing, and the loss of the town's major employer.

Before the base officially closed, the Maine Rural Development Council and local citizens invited the Center for Consensual Democracy (CCD) to help the town respond to the anticipated crisis. The nonprofit, 501(c) 3 CCD, since re-named *The Running Start Institute*, facilitates grass-roots civic renewal and community building.

The Institute relied on its affiliate organization, Advanced Management Catalyst Inc. for facilitation, guidance and support throughout process the process of "recreating Limestone." At the initial community strategic planning meeting, homemakers and teachers, business people and retired military personnel, high school students and elected officials, potato producers and unemployed people worked to create a vision of their ideal community as it would appear in 2028. The focus of the effort was to create a new Limestone.

Using the AMCat process, Limestone residents defined strategic goals, identified the tasks required to realize their goals, chose their top priorities, and formed volunteer teams to work on their critical civic objectives.

Buoyed by the enthusiasm and cooperation generated by the Catalyst, Limestone's citizens tackled their objectives in priority order. By the end of 1995 substantial progress had been made on what was intended to be a 35-year plan. See the video, *Community in Crisis Limestone* (<http://video.google.com/videosearch?q=Community+in+Crisis+limestone>).

The key to Limestone's success has been its ability to remain focused on the community's strategic priorities, initially the creation of a statewide "magnet school" of science and mathematics. Setting up a magnet school in a "dying" town in the far north woods of Maine was very controversial. Nevertheless, the community succeeded. Seasoned legislators attributed this victory to Limestone's united volunteer action. Once funding for the magnet school was secured, volunteers began to focus on how to support magnet school students as new members of the community. Residents helped create ten new student-oriented businesses, from a pick-up-and-deliver laundry service to a book store.

In addition, Limestone citizens attracted a local health care facility, began publishing a community newsletter, constructed a new pavilion and recreational facilities in the local park, developed a municipal campground, and created a public access television station.

Fourteen years later, the Running Start Institute—and AMCi—continue to provide strategic management support to the Community—most recently in 2006. The citizen leaders of Limestone described their community as undergoing a "civic renaissance." They cite a more vital civic life, increased church attendance, higher tax revenues, decreasing poverty, the integration of magnet school students and teachers into community life, and the new influx of people employed at Loring Commerce Centre.