

Successful Non-Profit Collaboratives: The Example of ENHC

by Melissa Mannon

I recently attended the semi-annual meeting for the Essex National Heritage Commission in Essex, Massachusetts. The meeting was held on the beautiful campus of Endicott College. While driving during rush hour, as I neared my destination, I was struck by the beauty of the town of Beverly. Located right on the water, the town reminded me of my own home town in Huntington, New York. In fact, the two share similar histories with tales of early American settlement and a seafaring way of life. The meeting I was to attend would get me thinking more about connections and the need to promote them.

What struck me most is how closely these areas tie their history to their tourism industry. Tying together history and tourism, along with other existing resources such as parks and recreation, has allowed these areas to blossom.

The Essex National Heritage Commission was established in the 1990s to promote the area's resources and to encourage "cultural heritage tourism." Essex is one of 37 areas

in the country recognized by Congress "for their ability to tell America's story." As such, they are partially funded through federal dollars. But because of federal cutbacks, these cultural bodies are relying more and more on state and private dollars to supplement the work that they do.

This work includes grant programs for local cultural organizations, visitors centers, educational programs, identifying landscape resources, and organizing various visible activities that promote the areas and all they have to offer. ENHC's "Trails and Sails" is becoming a particularly recognizable example of this.

I have worked as an archives consultant for ENHC and some of its member organizations in the past. I have always been impressed by their rising momentum and the supreme focus of the group. They now employ a staff of about ten (some full and some part time.) They have been so successful that they continue to grow. Middlesex County in Massachusetts is now looking toward

Essex's example in an attempt to promote their area. The key is that ENHC recognized early on that their audience is everyone — not just culture groupies. They had a vision of the need for collaboration among historical people, business people, non profits, schools, individuals, and government.

I often hear from non-profits that they cannot achieve their goals because they do not have a large base of support, thus they do not have funding or manpower. As a non-profit, it is up to you to build a base of support. Aim to show "outsiders" or people you do not normally consider your target audience why your organization matters to them. Aim to show how they can tap your cultural resources to build a stronger "economic engine." (I heard this term used at Essex and I really like it because it forces us to think like business people and to not focus on our nonprofit status, which sometimes in my estimation leads to a defeatist attitude.)

The key focus of the meeting was the idea of main-

taining focus and momentum. In fact, these semi-annual meetings themselves were designed for the purpose of keeping people informed and involved. Think of it as a cultural pep rally. Collaborative programs can only work with enthusiastic individuals propelling them. One person to drive the effort and volunteers for support form a "rising tide lifting all ships" according to one individual speaking at the meeting.

Essex has even thought to recognize individuals who drive through programs, encouraging them to keep up their efforts. The ENHC "Pioneers in Partnership" award was given out at the meeting I attended. I had the honor of watching my client, Bill Whiting from Topsfield Massachusetts receive one. Bill drove through grant funding to obtain an archives consultant and then pushed ahead to achieve goals we laid out for the Topsfield Historical Society about four years ago. The main point is that Bill's over the top efforts were rewarded by peers and professionals. Sure he gets warm fuzzies for just getting the job done, but an award does a lot for the human spirit as well. It encourages volunteers to

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continue volunteering and moving ahead.

Additionally, ENHC knows that everything takes money and they don't wait for the money to come to them. They continue over and over again to make a solid case for their existence and their work over the last decade. They continually request funds from every direction and they continue to get them. Focus, focus, focus is key!

ENHC continually educates people why Essex is a great place to live, work and visit. They tell everyone in the county that "great things can happen when we work together." They stay on message and the more often they say it, the more targets they hit and the more people start to believe it. The more people who start to believe something, the more likely they are to make it happen.

Essex has secured a regional identity for their area. They encourage strong communities, and partnerships. They

enliven cultural heritage and provide supplemental education. They have goals for the future, such as group purchasing for non-profits and insurance. Essex National Heritage Commission is a shining example for the cultural community. Follow their lead.

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Read more about Essex National Heritage Commission in the Fall 2007 edition of *North Shore Living*.

Tips for Maintaining Records

- Begin with a strong mission statement and objectives. Create a vision for your future. (See ArchivesInfo Autumn 2004)
- Make a list of what your resources offer to the community. For example: Can you help your local parks group make the park more interesting by tying in an historical element? Can you bring some primary documents to the schools for teachers lessons? Can your resources help businesses create more successful promotional materials by emphasizing nostalgia?
- Brainstorm ideas about what you would like to achieve. Do you want a new building? Do you need more manpower? Do you want to obtain paid employees so that you do not have to rely solely on volunteer support? Do not start with the thought that any project is too big. Be open to everything. Follow the examples of others like Essex who have gone before you.
- Take your list and decide what aspects of it may appeal to various community members. Approach members of your community to create a collaborative plan. (See ArchivesInfo Summer and Winter 2001, Autumn 2002)
- Seek preliminary grants to help you establish a collaborative, while simultaneously seeking private funding. If necessary, spend money to hire a grant writer who is familiar with the process. Grant writers can often find you money when you think there is none. Other professionals whom you can bring in for a short period can also help you jump start a collaborative.
- Retain your enthusiasm. If you ever feel it waning, reach out to others who have collaborated successfully. If the prospect of collaboration seems overwhelming, take it one step at a time. Choose one collaborator (the schools or town clerk are often good places to start.) Build on the experience when you are ready.