In late 2009, a chance conversation on the untapped potential and seemingly consistent pattern of related concerns and barriers to economic development identified along New York State’s canal corridor led to an informal gathering of principal staff from Cornell Cooperative Extension and the New York State Department of Labor as well as numerous representatives of other regional, state, and federal agencies. The meeting was convened by Cornell University’s Community and Regional Development Institute (CaRDI) and facilitated around a presentation by Dr. Susan Christopherson on legacy assets, “phoenix industries,” and the canal corridor as the economic and symbolic “spine of upstate New York’s historic strength and innovation.” At the same time, the Economic Development Agency (EDA) of the U.S. Department of Commerce released a paper on economic clustering in the United States and New York State was void of any multiregional cluster on the nationwide map produced by Harvard University’s Business School and used in the EDA report.3

Out of these observations and conversations was born the idea of undertaking a series of search conferences along the canal corridor in 2010 to bring together a diverse mix of economic, cultural, educational, community, and employment development entities from urban and rural settings across multiple upstate metropolitan regions. Four conferences were held in total between April and December 2010 in Syracuse, Buffalo, Utica, and Ithaca. During each of these approximately four-hour long search conferences, participants were asked to identify regional and meta-regional assets and barriers toward future economic development and clustering, as well as tactical plans to move these efforts forward over both the short- and long-term. Additionally, a paid intern from the policy studies program at Syracuse University was engaged in researching the features of successful economic clusters and the historic patterns of the canal corridor around innovation. The final intention of these efforts was to determine if the canal corridor has what it takes to form a recognized multi-regional economic cluster and, if so, what is currently impeding the developments necessary to toward that end.

ASSETS, AUTHENTICITY, AND MULTIPLE ENTRY POINTS

A key theme that emerged from the four search conferences was the incredible sense of bountiful amenities and a high quality of life throughout Upstate. The Canal Corridor was described as a series of “amazing pearls” strung together. This sense of place relates to authenticity and the lasting legacy of early settlement by the five Iroquois nations, the Dutch, and the English. Four unique community identities emerged, deriving from a combination of assets

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2 December 2nd 2009 Conversation Notes
ranging from history and heritage, the arts, farms and food, educational institutions, natural amenities, water resources, recreational activities, seasonal variations, and cultural diversity to a skilled workforce, varied transportation infrastructure, and diverse economies—seen as competitive advantages in the development of a meta-regional corridor for economic development.

There are several economics development entities in the state of New York, each with a slightly different emphasis. The life sciences and renewable/green energy and clean technology, however, are common points of entry and recognized assets shared by several of the economic development organizations. Development in computer and electronic products is emphasized in central New York and the Southern Tier, while homeland security/defense and nanotechnology/semiconductors are a focus of the Center for Economic Growth in the Capital Region and the Greater Rochester Enterprise. Other key industries for development identified by regional economic development agencies include aerospace, agribusiness, information technology, optics and photonics, knowledge/learning, and chemical manufacturing.

OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS TO ESTABLISHING A META-REGION

Regardless of geographic differences, participant discussions in the four Search Conferences made it clear that barriers to business growth were consistent across the Canal Corridor. The following common barriers emerged across the four conferences:

- A lack of collaboration and cooperation; parochialism; and a lack of cohesive plans to move the entire region forward may be the result of inadequate political leadership and/or too many layers of government;
- Upstate NY has lost its ‘identity;’ compounded by state branding that is most identified with New York City; and
- New York State is perceived as not business friendly with its high taxes and inconsistent transportation and infrastructure capability and capacity.

Rather than focusing on these issues participants in each of the four search conferences expressed the desire to find solutions to these impediments that prevent the metro-regions and the meta-region from reaching their full potential. Ideas generated through this iterative approach ranged from very specific tactics to those broader in scope.

In many cases participants considered the benefits of leveraging education assets to forward regional initiatives; for example, as part of a class curriculum students could be used to develop materials that:

- Encourage connectivity and cooperation by creating a networking central resource (some specific actions could include a listserv, outreach database);
- Leverage formal partnerships with education institutions, tap into students to help with projects; and
- Enhance connections among educational institutions.

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4 “Canal Innovation Corridor: NYS Meta-Regional History and Current Need for an Upstate Transformational Network,” PowerPoint presentation
Further, there was a general consensus about the need to develop a brand that builds on the existing strengths of the region and would enhance cohesiveness across the metro-regions:

- Establish one vision/one goal and use meta-regional media to promote brand and its inherent benefits;
- Study other successful regions across the nation and apply best practices;
- Expand the role of an existing marketing person (for example, at a Chamber or economic development organization) to promote and coordinate a set of activities across all the metro-regions; for example ‘Embrace winter’ with a series of events;
- Develop top ten lists for each region, for example create an interactive cultural food map (I ♥ to eat NY); and
- Link to a Canal Corridor cost of living calculator from individual metro-region websites to demonstrate the (relative) low cost of living along the Canal Corridor.

Each metro-region described the importance of increasing business growth and attraction opportunities. Potential solutions ranged from broad approaches to addressing the need to simplify and make more cohesive the means by which economic development is conducted across the Canal Corridor:

- Increase access to broadband;
- Foster public-private partnerships;
- Align requirements and enforcement policies across municipalities to provide better services and simplify processes for organizations whose businesses reach across metro-region geographies; and
- Grow entrepreneurial opportunities.

Note: what follows are one page overviews of each search conference (Syracuse, Ithaca, Utica, and Buffalo)
SYRACUSE SEARCH CONFERENCE

1. Regional Economic Development Potential (# of votes)
   - Educational Assets (9)
   - Intellectual capacity in general populace (7)
   - Transportation assets (3)
   - History/culture (2)
   - Natural resources/water (2)

   Note: 44 votes were placed on negative communication themes relating to identity.

2. Meta-Regional Potential
   - Assets to build upon (as above)
   - Historic business development
   - Current business development

   Note: This question was not really addressed at this conference and these themes were drawn from findings elsewhere.

3. Regional Barriers to Economic Development
   - Too many layers of government (36)
   - Fragmented or lack of unique identity (34)
   - Many Regional Brandings (22)
   - Parochialism or territoriality (15)
   - Lack of Cooperation/Collaboration (6)

   Note: There was significant cross regional bleeding so these findings could apply also to the interregional barriers question below.

4. Interregional Barriers to Economic Development
   - An Upstate identity (13)
   - Negative self-perception (4)

5. Tactical Planning
   - Reduce competition and encourage cooperation/connectivity (ID commonality, cross regional understanding, marketing alliances) (184)
   - Move with sense of urgency (38)
   - Provide a central resource for networking (34)
   - Identify and build on assets (31)
   - Grow entrepreneurial opportunities (25)
   - Understand what we will lose if we don’t do this (21)
   - One vision—one goal (17)
ITHACA SEARCH CONFERENCE

1. Regional Economic Development Potential (# of votes)
   - Human capital (34)
   - Natural resources (fresh water, natural gas, agricultural soil base, scenic beauty) (32)
   - Strong industrial assets (28)
   - Agriculture (wineries, dairy, produce, food processing, wind farming) (20)
   - Education (including colleges and universities) (17)

2. Meta-Regional Potential
   - Collaboration is key (74)
   - Quality of life (46)
   - Energy/natural resources (water, natural gas, sustainability) (23)
   - Education (16)

3. Regional Barriers to Economic Development
   - Lack of a regional identity/brand (no one knows what upstate is) (43)
   - Multiple layers of gov’t.—tax structure (36)
   - Lack of a regional plan means lack of a marketing plan (21)
   - Transportation and infrastructure—roads/railroads/fiber/broadband/regional airport (12)

4. Interregional Barriers to Economic Development
   - Best practices (including branding, leadership, human capital development) (70)
   - Regional Approach to Economic Development (51)

5. Tactical Planning
   - Better alignment of state service agencies—DOT, DEC, DOL, etc. (fractured sense of place is a key barrier) (37)
   - Define the region’s identity and use as a marketing brand (30)
   - Organize regular meetings to develop/strengthen relationships (27)
   - Access to broadband to allow greater connectivity across our largely rural region (18)
   - Meta-regional media to share ideas, generate attention around the regional brand (14)
1. Regional Economic Development Potential (# of votes)
   - One of the longest runways in the nation (9)
   - Events (i.e., free, high quality events that attract the “creative class” e.g. Utica Monday Nite/Boilermaker (9)
   - Low cost of living (8)
   - Water—the canal et al. (6)
   - Location (6)

2. Meta-Regional Potential
   - Food (Grow, Eat, Buy local—organic slow food movement) (9)
     - Multi-venue/city discount—passport
     - More festivals (Utica Monday Nite, Rust to Green, RCIIZ)
   - Available land (8)
   - Cultural/ethnic diversity (7)
   - Canal/thruway (7)
   - Strong relationships between employers and educational institutions (6)

3. Regional/Interregional Barriers to Economic Development
   - Loss of “I Love NY” campaign (14)
   - Lack of full time director of promotion for the state (10)
   - Negative attitude—hopelessness, perception problem, taxes too high, utilities too high, burdensome regulations (8)
   - The 3 P’s aka Politics, parochialism, paranoia (e.g., regions compete with each other for scarce resources and won’t engage in cross regional/meta regional initiatives for fear they will get less than someone else (7)
   - No identifier for region (5)

4. Tactical Planning
   - Bring back I Love NY
   - Full time director/coordinator of promotion for state
   - Investigate grant opportunities for funding from educational institutions and recruit work-study students to develop and maintain information
   - Focus on agricultural assets
   - Draw up a top 10 list of things we are known for—regional identifiers
   - Focus on Food:
     - Stakeholders: CCE, Local restaurants, Casino
     - Identify foods that make our region unique (ethnic foods, chicken riggies, half moon cookies). This could easily be extrapolated to meta region
     - Promotion and marketing (DUDA signature sandwiches)
     - Cookbook/website
     - Food trail/agri-tourism map
   - Embrace winter with events from Albany to Buffalo
   - Cost of living calculator

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5 Utica region-specific plans: identified a point person for Utica region and looking to find a permanent home for that position, as well as looking at indicators (United Way, EDGE, Community foundation) – figure out what funding is available
BUFFALO SEARCH CONFERENCE

1. Regional Economic Development Potential (# of votes)
   - Geographic location—proximity to Canada, waterways, etc. (25)
   - Natural resources (19)
   - Infrastructure (15)
   - Quality of life (14)
   - Educational institutions (14)
   - Tourism (13)

2. Meta-Regional Potential
   - Bi-national corridor (30)
   - Higher education (22)
   - Natural resources (20)
   - Quality of life (19)
   - Tourism and life sciences (Medical Corridor) (11)

3. Regional/Interregional Barriers to Economic Development
   - Lack of leadership (20)
   - Not business friendly (20)
   - Politicians – self-serving, inter-fighting, city vs. suburbs (16)
   - High taxes in region and state (11)
   - Negative image (11)
   - Poverty in region (7)

4. Tactical Planning
   - Inclusion and trust/emulate successful regions (33)
   - Incentives for collaboration (16)
   - Less competition between communities (14)
   - Positive attitude (14)
   - Prioritizing goals once established (13)
   - Define “Development Organizations” across spectrum of economic/social/cultural/environmental (12)
   - Identify leaders from various sectors that can help with the collaboration (12)
   - Communication—venues and opportunities (10)