

Capitalizing On Social Capital

Lewis Feldstein, president of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, wants to know what are you doing to improve the world. Heck, forget the world. What are you doing to improve your community, your neighborhood, your cul de sac?

"In communities with high social capital, the people are literally happier about their lives," he says. They're healthier, schools are better dollar-for-dollar, communities are safer, and businesses work better."

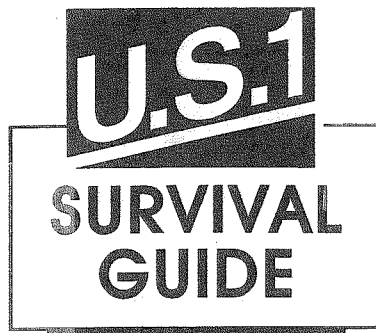
Feldstein will be the keynote speaker at the Better Together Forum, held on Tuesday, October 28, at 8 a.m. at the Conference Center at Mercer County Community College. The event is free, but registration is required. Visit www.bettertogethercnj.org, E-mail bettertogether@pacf.org, or call Nancy Jeliel at 609-219-1800.

Forum attendees will hear an overview of the 2007 Central New Jersey Social Capital benchmark survey, discuss the importance of establishing community connections, and explore ways to successfully increase social capital. The forum will also include five breakout sessions; participants can attend two of the sessions, which include:

"Creating Organizations, Creating Change" with Andrew Seligson, coordinator for civic engagement learning at Princeton University's Pace Center; "Civic Engagement Over 60" with Susan Wilson, a trustee for the Princeton Area Community Foundation; "Virtual Communities, Real Connections" with Janet Temos, director of Princeton University's Educational Technologies Center; "Differences that Strengthen Communities" with Feldstein; and "Place Matters" with J. Robert Hillier, of the RMJM Hillier architecture firm.

"We know social capital works," Feldstein says. "But how do we get people to do it? That's what we're working on."

Feldstein grew up on Long Island, where his father worked as a general director and his mother was a homemaker. He has three children and five grandchildren, whom he spoils without apologies. "That's what grandfathers should do," he says.



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Feldstein, who has received six honorary doctorates, earned a bachelor's from Brown and a master's degree from Tufts. He served in several senior staff positions to former New York City Mayor John Lindsay and worked with the civil rights movement in Mississippi. Most recently he co-chaired Harvard's "Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America."

But, perhaps, among his most notable accomplishments, he says, are his seven-year tenure as the emcee of the International Zucchini

Love Thy Neighbor:
Lewis Feldstein says that areas high in social capital are healthier and happier.

Festival and a stint as the wine steward and personal assistant to actor John Wayne on his yacht in the Mediterranean. "Those are the bookends of my life," he says, jokingly. "All of the other stuff is fluff."

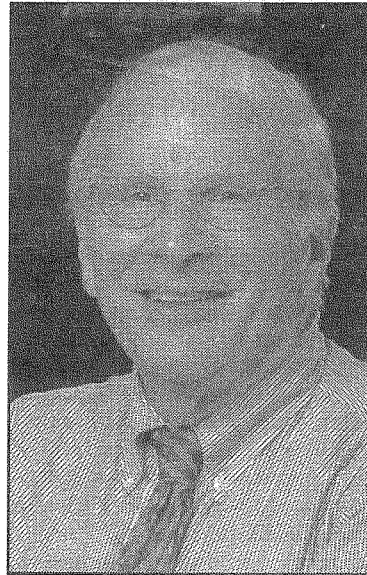
Today Feldstein speaks extensively about social capital and oversees the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, a private, statewide organization and the principal source of venture capital for New Hampshire's nonprofit community.

Defining social capital. Social capital is the collective value of social networks — business associations, church committees, and community organizations, for example — coupled with the ideas of reciprocity and cooperation.

"There's a lot of interest in the subject," Feldstein says. "It's become more and more global, and people are feeling somewhat of a disconnection from their own community. They can turn on the TV news and learn about what's going on in Bosnia, but they don't know what's going on down the street."

"Social capital is a sense of connection and safety and trust in a community," he continues. "And certainly, that's something many of us miss."

Increasing social capital. Increasing social capital is rooted in establishing and maintaining solid relationships, which can be hindered by several obstacles, including economic gaps and growing diversity.



"The growing economic gap makes it harder to establish a sense of trust in communities," he says. "It's a barrier." The same goes for diversity, which he says extends beyond race and into small business vs. big-box, longtime residents vs. newcomers, and working mothers vs. stay-at-home moms.

"As diversity grows rapidly in America, in the short run it causes divides," he says. "It causes people to hunker down like turtles and bury their heads." However, the communities that can increase their social capital are likely to have higher educational achievement, less crime, well-performing governments, better community relations, and faster economic growth, Feldstein says.

In New Hampshire, for example, his foundation has helped to preserve 100,000 acres in less than five years. Completing that task would have been impossible without social capital, which the foundation used to connect civic leaders, as well as find available money and resources.

"We spend a lot of time trying to influence public policy," says Feldstein, a registered lobbyist. "Those discussions fuel me. We don't believe that the things we care most about can be accomplished with only the grant money afforded to us. We need the private sector's help."

But, he adds, "Money is not tied to social capital. It's useful but not necessary. By itself, it's certainly not the answer."

Ways to build social capital. "There is no simple magic bullet but there are a hundred things people can do to build social capital — from volunteering at church to taking food to a shut-in neighbor, to coaching Little League," Feldstein says.

Better Together offers 150 ways to build social capital on its website, www.bettertogether.org. Ideas, big and small, include volunteering, avoiding gossip, becoming a mentor, planning a potluck dinner, and joining a bowling team.

"The motto in 'Cheers,' where everybody knows your name, captures one important aspect of social capital," according to a passage on the Web site. "Social capital can be found in friendship networks, neighborhoods, churches, schools, bridge clubs, civic associations, and even bars." —Kristin Boyd