

BLOOMFIELD TOWN COUNCIL

LAND USE & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SUBCOMMITTEE

There was a regular meeting of the above referenced subcommittee held on Tuesday, February 19, 2013 at 7:00 p.m. in Conference Room #5, Bloomfield Town Hall, 800 Bloomfield Avenue, Bloomfield, CT.

Committee members present were: Councilor Gamble, Deputy Mayor Hypolite

Also present were: Mayor Schulman, Councilors Rivers, DeLorenzo, Washington and Banks, India Rodgers, Clerk of Council, Thom Hooper, Director of Planning, Heidi Samokar, Planimetrics, Jerry Long, Michelle Bononi, John Sheehan, Robert Berman, Vera Smith-Winfrey, Bonnie Bercowetz, Kevin Gough, Paula Jones

The meeting was called to order at 7:10 p.m.

Town Center Planning Assessment

Ms. Heidi Samokar, Senior Planner of Planimetrics presented an update of the overall progress regarding the planning assessment for the Town Center. Ms. Samokar gave an overview of the project process since the last meeting in September with stakeholders. She focused on the following areas of the project:

- Strategic Direction
- Identified the Town Center as an essential business district
- Process with stakeholder and interviews to solicit an inventory and assessment
- Discussions with the town's Economic Development Commission (EDC) to review findings

The key findings of the planning assessment were as follows:

- Retail – small boutique style/specialty foods
- Restaurants
- Office spaces
- Housing possibly over retail? However, the current market does not support this finding
- No Hotel – due to climate in the market, occupancy rates, attractiveness to outside consumers

Challenges that were presented:

- Little vacant land
- Rents
- Organizational capacity – identifying the lead organization/entity that will implement the plan
- Parking
- Lack of image/brand

Several opportunities included:

- Property owners are eager to improve and make changes
- Restaurants – an emerging “International Cuisine” theme
- “Customers” identified in churches, senior housing sites and possibly office space for the University of Hartford are drawn to the Town Center already
- Renewed interest in town centers as a destination

The overall recommendation of Planimetrics is to have some short and long term goals. The Strategic Direction is as follows:

- Support and help grow existing businesses (Brand/Image)
- Fill vacancies (short term – focus on projects to appeal attractiveness) and recruit businesses
- Affirm town's commitment to Town Center through capital improvements
- Strengthen the town's ability to do Economic Development in the center (Leader's focus)
- Set framework for long term redevelopment

Every strategy depends on the Town's commitment, property owners and businesses. The town can commit to a few short term actions such as:

- Showing total commitment and progress
- Building confidence for long term aspirations

The committee and participants from the public ensued in a discussion about assessment findings, input and recommendations for the next step in the process.

Councilor Jacobs inquired about the level of commitment to the businesses. He questioned the town's active role and commitment as well as the overall redevelopment project.

Councilor Washington mentioned the idea of hiring a grant writer to assist the need of business owners when seeking financial assistance, i.e. startup funding, facade improvement program – state grants depending on availability.

Deputy Mayor Hypolite inquired about the organizational capacity, the need to have a leader in place to continue the pursuit of the best needs of the town. He also suggested the need to build excitement and focus on the town and work with existing businesses. Deputy Mayor Hypolite expressed interest in small goals that could be completed with little or no funds to show some level of progress in moving forward.

Mayor Schulman stated that at the last stakeholders meeting with property owners, it was suggested to have a tax district specifically for the Town Center. He also expressed the need to have a brand or image for the town, identifying the Town of Bloomfield.

Mr. Robert Berman, 8 Hiram Lane stated that the town should refocus attention to Filley Park as an asset of the town. The revitalization of this park could possibly assist with setting a tone for the center of town.

Mrs. Bonnie Bercowetz, a member of the Economic Development Commission (EDC) is in agreement with a theme for the center of town. She also feels that the focus to promote international restaurant theme would also work. Mrs. Bercowetz mentioned the possibility of hiring a grant writer to seek funding for town projects. She also stated the need to utilize Filley Park as a building block for the overall center. It was further stated that Bloomfield is an All-American city that has a very diverse community and discussions about hiring a consultant would need to have specific skill sets such as:

- Committed and business oriented
- Familiar with social media connection on how to infuse dollars in the center of the Town of Bloomfield.
- Defining who is in charge and their specific role
- Developing a positive consensus among the community

Mrs. Michelle Bononi, member of the EDC expressed her thoughts and experience as an Urban Planner. Mrs. Bononi stated that the town should focus on an existing idea and build up. Beginning with small projects that are visible, in which residents can see progress moving forward. Some of these projects may include new signage on designed marquee as well as revitalizing the Drummer Boy area on the town green.

Councilor Gamble mentioned utilizing electronic billboards to promote outside interest to come to the center of town and experience a variety of International cuisine. She also mentioned the possibility of closing Seneca Road to promote more parking spaces for increase traffic in the center of town.

Mr. Jerry Long stated the need to focus on strategic ideas rather than tactical recommendations that would benefit the town in future years to come.

Mr. John Sheehan, a resident and former Town Council member stated that a professional representation of Bloomfield is needed to inventory businesses and prioritize projects. Secondly, the town should consider a parking authority to collect additional revenue. Lastly, the Town is in need of a traffic study to be completed by the State of Connecticut. The enhancement of the electronic signs to be modulated and businesses could advertise specials and promote commerce.

Councilor Jacobs suggested to focus on priorities in hiring someone to grow and expand the town. In the midst, of hiring a new Town Manager with a vision and focus for Economic Development. This idea could be set as a major goal for the town. Councilor Jacobs highly recommended developing a mission statement and work to achieve those goals.

Mayor Schulman commented on the hiring of a grant writer. Many grant writers contract for a fee of percentage of grants and programs. They are paid to coordinate short term goals and develop concepts for the town. He recommended drawing on identity and diversity within the town. The town also needs to focus on obtaining key information from businesses and recommendations of a consultant.

Councilor Rivers asked the committee about the necessity to have a theme for the town center. They all agreed on the idea of establishing a brand or an image for Bloomfield. He suggested that a brand could be done through a facade program and solicits public opinion from the town.

Mrs. Paula Jones and Mr. Kevin Gough requested that the Council and the EDC review the Plan of Conservation holistically to show all of the benefits for the town center as well as the town as a whole. The connection to the East Cost Greenway, FilleyPark and other areas of open space for passive recreation can draw crowds from the Greater Hartford region to the center of town.

Property at 66 Douglas Street

Councilor Gamble stated that the town was approached by Pratt & Whitney Measurement company. They expressed interest in buying a parcel of land located at 66 Douglas Street. Currently, the land is open space (.6) acres on Britton Drive subdivision. Attorney Marc Needelman recommended consideration to resubdivide or dedicate other open space as a replacement.

OTHER BUSINESS

Mrs. Bononi asked Mayor Schulman about the role of the Economic Development Commission (EDC). The EDC is appointed by the Town Manager and acts as a technical advisory group to assist the town in executing business developments to the Plan of Conservation and Development. Members of this Commission requested a clear understanding on duties with guidance on what should be done.

ADJOURNMENT

It was moved by Councilor Gamble, seconded by Councilor Rivers and voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 8:55 p.m.