

Economic Development Public Forum Notes

02/01/2016

Tom Bock opened the public meeting at 6 PM and made introductions. Bob Flint (SRDC) facilitated the meeting and Jason Rasmussen (SWCRPC) presented information about the planning process and next steps. The purpose of this meeting was to gather input on the local economy, specifically about the current conditions, desired future conditions and what the Town can do to achieve the desired future economic conditions.

Written comments were submitted from the Chester Economic Development Committee and the Town of Chester.

Bob Flint mentioned Windsor's recent marketing effort, which involved \$5,000 from the Town and \$5,000 from the State. The collaborative marketing effort targeted affluent people via Google. It generated 9,000 clicks on the Town's marketing webpage.

Marji Graf discussed Chamber services and made a few observations:

- A. The Chamber needs to get better information for the regional guidebook and website events calendar in order to help market Chester.
- B. The Chamber tries to direct people to Chester via Weston in order to get them to the Green. Traveling by VT 103, people often miss the Green and drive through town without stopping.
- C. Events, such as the fall festival, are successful – capitalize on those events
- D. Chester is known for arts and antiques – build on your strengths

Comments discussed at the meeting are summarized below:

- A. Important economic sectors include agriculture, forestry, arts & crafts, culture, history and recreation
- B. Overall goal is to improve the socio-economic well-being of Chester residents
- C. Economic development is broader than just jobs
- D. Focus on maintaining and improving the quality of life
- E. Embrace Chester's place within the regional economy (e.g. success in the North Springfield Industrial Park can benefit Chester residents with jobs)
- F. Align land use regulations and infrastructure investment priorities with economic development goals
- G. Retention/employment of recent high school graduates
- H. Chester is a great place to live (i.e. great lifestyle, charming/historic village)
- I. Village charm brings thousands of visitors a year, but we need to make a concerted effort to capture more of the VT Route 103 traffic that passes by without knowing about the Green
- J. A plan is a great idea, but it needs to include an implementation plan with measurable actions. Don't be too ambitious. Identify some low-hanging fruit; we need some "wins" early on after the plan is completed.
- K. Three most important parts of town: the Green, Chester Depot, the Gateway (i.e. by the Legion along VT 103 South)
- L. Need to maintain the charm, culture, lifestyle that we currently have.
- M. Town needs to encourage/support successful businesses. Successful businesses, in turn, should invest in their buildings and help to improve the town.

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- N. Strong Communities, Better Connections grant application that the Town submitted will help to identify specific improvements, such as signage and marketing.
- O. Chester needs additional shops (i.e. ladies shoe or apparel store) along the Green that might create a “browsing effect”. A strong business district with many good stores and restaurants will help to create a destination and generate increased business.
- P. Chester is a hidden gem; no one knows that it exists. Need more signage, website/social presence in order to get people here.
- Q. Need more events on the Green.
- R. Make the Green a destination (e.g. replace paving with cobble stones, patio dining, etc.). The Green should “become a place to dwell” like small, European villages that are the business and social center of the community.
- S. Businesses need incentives to make investments (e.g. loans, grants, lower taxes, tax breaks, tax credits)
- T. Increase traffic flow by the Green via signage, marketing
- U. Develop stronger unity among businesses along the Green
- V. Chester’s commercial properties are lower in price. As a result, there is less commercial broker activity in Chester (than in places like Lebanon and Burlington).
- W. Bank loans don’t view home occupations as a value added business.
- X. Encourage small businesses.
- Y. Seek more arts & crafts businesses in order to become a destination.
- Z. Pursue ways to become more interesting, fun, with things to do (e.g. events, amenities, cluster of similar businesses, etc.)
- AA. Look at NY State economic zones for inspiration. Create some kind of tax break or tax stabilization incentives for Chester.
- BB. Make Chester government business friendly
- CC. Consider a local options tax (e.g. Manchester’s 1% tax) to generate revenue to pay for some of these programs
- DD. Create an attractive gateway into the Stone Village (e.g. stone walls, public sculpture, farmer’s market)
- EE. Regarding workforce/demographics:
 - 1) Drew’s is now working 3 shifts
 - 2) Newsbank has a hard time finding higher-end workers
 - 3) Need to work with schools
 - 4) Need higher wages to help people move here
 - 5) Cost to do business in VT is high, businesses need to increase revenue
- FF. New Jiffy Mart location will change traffic patterns
- GG. Encourage home occupations and improve the charm of the VT 103 South “gateway” area
- HH. Consider a shop local program (“Shop Chester First”)
- II. Chester has very fast internet speeds; use that to your advantage
- JJ. Need more transportation options (i.e. public transportation with connections to Boston, need to make the Current’s services better known around town)
- KK. Delineate on-street parking around the Green
- LL. Improve traffic circulation (one-way along the Green) and improve wayfinding, directing traffic on where to go park and finds stuff to do

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- MM. Take care of existing businesses/residents
- NN. Chester's is a tourist-based economy
- OO. The Town Plan reads well, but it does not work well in Act 250. It needs to be more specific (i.e. building size limits, design considerations). Projects need to be evaluated with the future in mind (i.e. buildings that last and contribute to local charm)
- PP. Scale of motion: slow traffic along VT Route 103, create/improve the environment for walking around the Green.
- QQ. There are eyesores along VT 103 south
- RR. Consider using the fields along VT 103 south for events/festival grounds (e.g. Chester smorgasbord)

Infrastructure is important to any long range development goals. The Town will therefore continue to fund, as well as seek outside assistance, for water, sewer, storm water projects as well as roads and sidewalk maintenance and improvements to add to the quality of life for current citizens and to assist future economic development. Typically this infrastructure funding will not be made by the Economic Development Fund but will come from other Town, State or Federal monies.

The Town of Chester will stress business development that does not cause significant investment to upgrade and/or expand already existing infrastructure that will put an undue burden on the taxpayer. This does not mean other business activity falling outside this parameter will be declined, only that it will be carefully reviewed for its benefits and to ascertain whether creative ways are possible to still attract a 'high-cost' enterprise without undue stress to individuals living in the community. Infrastructure development that can be financed at a minimum cost to residents will be looked at in a favorable light conditioned on the fact that planning, zoning and DRB requirements have been met. Ultimately, any benefits must be weighed in relation to their cost.

Since Economic Development is viewed in Socio-Economic terms, a high social cost may disqualify an enterprise as a choice for Chester. A vast junk yard at the entrance to Town may produce monetary benefits but aesthetically would not fit with the long-range vision many people hold for Chester, as an example.

While infrastructure is recognized to be important; so too is **public safety considered a vital element of the Town.** Chester will therefore continue to fund, as well as seek outside assistance to maintain high quality fire, police and ambulance departments in regards to equipment, facilities and service to the community. As with infrastructure funding, public safety funding will typically come from sources other than the Economic Development Fund.

Solid waste disposal and recycling are also important aspects of a community's overall well-being. Chester will continue to support the most efficient and cost effective means to deliver this service to its citizens.

Chester agrees that **education is important to any community.** Notwithstanding this statement, Chester will also advocate for the most efficient delivery of this product that still allows for the fullest academic achievement and life preparation of students. **Retention and employment, in the immediate area, of as many graduates as possible, is important to the Town.**

Chester must strive to be a clean, well maintained beautiful community. The Town should be an inviting place for citizens and visitors alike. Future plans should consider all age groups and their needs. **Attracting and retaining young families is vital to Chester's future.**

Strong financial management of Town funds should be emphasized so that efficient operations are maintained over the long-term. This management effort should in turn support future plans for the betterment of Chester.

SUMMARY

Economic development should not be concerned solely with attracting new business to town. Nor should it only be concerned with economic returns. It should be viewed in a socio-economic framework so that all citizen's lives in the community will be improved. It should encompass the wide range of topics noted above. By creating and maintaining a beautiful, well managed community with a full complement of services, Chester will provide the basis for future the wellbeing of its residents.