

MINUTES
Town of Bel Air
BOARD OF TOWN COMMISSIONERS/STAFF RETREAT
February 27, 2021

The Board of Town Commissioners and selected staff convened in a retreat session on February 27, 2021 at the Bel Air Armory. Town Administrator Jesse Bane called the meeting to order at 8:00 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Mayor Amy G. Chmielewski
Commissioner Erin S. Hughes
Commissioner Donna L. Kahoe
Commissioner Kevin M. Bianca
Commissioner Patrick T. Richards

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT:

L. Jesse Bane, Town Administrator
Rachel Deaner, Deputy Director of Finance
Rowan Glidden, Senior Planner
Sergeant Matthew Gullion, Town of Bel Air Police
Trish Heidenreich, Director of Economic Development
Steve Kline, Director of Public Works
Michael Krantz, Director of Human Resources Administration
Lisa Moody, Director of Finance
Charles A. Moore, Chief of Police
Patti Parker, Community & Public Relations Manager
Richard J. Peschek, Assistant Police Chief
Kevin Small, Director of Planning

OTHERS:

Rod Bourn, Owner, Down Set Lead
Kathi Santora, Recording Secretary

1. CALL TO ORDER/OPENING COMMENTS

Mr. Bane provided an overview of COVID-19 precautions taken to ensure safety of all attendees. He noted that he will skip the previously-planned team building exercise. He introduced Rod Bourn, who facilitated the first 120 minutes of the meeting.

2. ROLL CALL & INTRODUCTIONS

All attendees introduced themselves. Mr. Bourn reviewed his background and the day's goal of helping the Town to review values, goals and culture.

3. SWOT EXERCISES

Mr. Bourn asked attendees to reflect on the question "It would be really cool if in 3 – 5 years, the Town of Bel Air could . . ." He asked participants to post thoughts on a sticky note and place them on a poster board set up for this purpose. He also asked people to share their thoughts on the Town's mission and vision statements, which were also posted on poster boards in various locations.

Mr. Bourn also asked the participants to consider the question "How do you know you are doing well?" and write these thoughts on sticky notes. Responses included: citizens happy and engaged; low crime; balanced budget; active real estate market.

One respondent noted that these items currently cannot be measured. Mr. Bourn asked the group if there are benchmarks to measure success. Can Bel Air benchmark against other similar municipalities?

Mr. Bourn went on to ask "What are key performance indicators for the Town of Bel Air?" Responses included business vacancy rate, jobs created, crime data, mental health, economic factors.

Mr. Bourn challenged the group to consider how to measure outcomes. He also asked participants to reflect on communication across departments and ways to improve.

Mr. Bourn asked participants to pair up with someone with whom they don't usually work. He asked them to talk about the questions previously posed: "It would be really cool if . . ." and "These are the things we should be measuring . . ." He later combined groups for further discussions.

Responses to "It would be cool if (the Town) . . ."

- resolved growth opportunities and obstacles
- expanded pedestrian and bicycle connectivity
- consolidated public use facilities
- developed outdoor spaces and created a destination town that yields economic growth
- fostered more direct interaction with residents and businesses

- completed the new police department and Town Hall renovations
- had a more traditional Main Street
- offered a hotel in town limits

Responses to “things we should be measuring . . .” included:

- additional revenue
- increases in permits
- vacancy rates
- event attendance
- increased tax revenues
- increased residents and businesses
- increased sidewalk and trail use
- need for less parking
- surveys/focus groups/follow up with residents

Mr. Bourn led a discussion about the advantages of bringing people together to brainstorm. Mr. Bourn then led the groups in a SWOT exercise. Results included:

Strengths:

- Staff/commissioner expertise and dedication to ideals
- Fiscally responsible, innovative, strong work ethics
- Humility
- Strong volunteer cadre

Weaknesses:

- Lack of communication/understanding between residents, businesses and town
- Perception that town is not business friendly
- Stagnant revenue stream
- Unrealistic expectations by stakeholders

Opportunities:

- Under-utilized real estate
- Community events
- Employment
- Shopping
- Community assets

Threats:

- Lack of natural resources
- No hotel
- Resistance to change
- Pandemic, economic recession, civil unrest
- Competition from other towns
- Natural disaster
- Public relations crisis

Mr. Bourn asked group members to examine the responses on the tear sheets and place check marks on items that are important to them. He noted that these items are the ones on which to focus in future planning. He suggested developing vague responses. He stated that such exercises can bring clarity and unity as staff moves forward. He suggested the staff assemble an action plan in the near future.

4. POLICE STATION EXPANSION & TOWN HALL: RENOVATION PROJECT UPDATE

Mr. Small provided a summary of the project to date, including previous studies, previous dates of staff/commissioner retreats, open houses, resident surveys, public input meetings and public outreach via mail and website. These date to 2017.

As a result of commissioner feedback, the design was reworked to balance function with cost effectiveness. Overall the building footprint has been reduced by 4,234 square feet. Rooms removed include a wellness center, meeting rooms and Department of Economic Development offices.

A final design development presentation will take place at the April 13, 2021 Board of Commissioners meeting. He explained that design developments expand on schematics with the input of all specialties. At that point, he estimates that design will be 90% finalized.

He has asked engineers to reduce storm ponds from three to two. Safety improvements are considered to the nearby intersection of Lee Street & Hickory Avenue. Pedestrian safety is of most concern at each end of the school day and this will influence what improvements will be made.

Mr. Small introduced the most recent police department building design and town hall renovations. He noted what rooms/functions had been moved or eliminated. The sallyport has not changed. Delivery areas are combined for police and IT. Some office halls/doors were modified for security and ease of access.

In summary, the current schematic design adds 11,808 sf. to Town Hall; 10,577 sf. of major changes to police department; 1,810 sf. of minor changes to Town Hall. There will be a new final cost estimate in the next few weeks.

Mr. Small showed a 3-dimensional drawing of the new building on the screen. At this time, interior finishes are considered basic, based on cost and the expected high use of the spaces. Items such as security systems and wiring are designed for current and future uses, e.g. wiring for TVs in each office. Having those data ports may someday be important. It is cost-effective to cover possible future infrastructure needs during current construction.

Ms. Moody reported on the financing and debt services figures. Interest rates are still lower than her last report. She will provide final numbers by mid-Spring. The maximum request for lending would be less than \$10M.

Possible tax increases to cover construction costs as well as future general operating needs range from \$.03 to .05, resulting in an average residential taxpayer cost of \$61.13 – \$101.89. Increases would be residential and commercial. The calculation has only been done for residential. Mr. Richards asked for details about tax increase impact across the board as the final decision nears. Mr. Richards confirmed with Ms. Moody that these decisions will be made by the time of the upcoming budget discussion.

Mr. Small reviewed the progress-to-date time line and introduced the long-term estimate of the construction's start and completion. Current projection for construction start is September 2021; completion in early 2023. This timeline is dependent on budget approvals.

Mr. Small confirmed there will be a traditional bidding process in accordance with Town policies. He provided a detailed cost estimate with handout materials. Contingencies have been noted, such as bonds and insurances. There will be unexpected costs, as in any major construction project.

Chief Moore thanked Mr. Small for his ongoing support and his response to feedback and adjustments.

5. THE BEL AIR ARMORY-A VISIONING EXERCISE FOR ITS FUTURE

Mr. Bane stated that he and Mr. Richards will informally lead this discussion. He stated that during a retreat on 3/3/18, a decision was made that 1) the Town will retain Armory ownership and 2) consideration would be given to finding a person or organization to manage the space and bring in revenue-producing events.

Since that time, the Town explored the possibility of having the Bel Air Downtown Alliance fulfill this function. However, no agreement has been reached and Mr. Bane feels that other alternatives should now be explored.

Mr. Richards stated that the Armory should be the center of the A & E District and the Town should control the strategic direction of this asset. One option would be to create a separate foundation similar to the one at Rockfield Manor. He believes the Armory, while a great asset, is outside the mission of the Town and its staff.

Mr. Krantz wondered if the Armory function could be merged into the Rockfield Foundation. Several people pointed out that the Rockfield Foundation has been very successful. However, others commented that this may not be a good fit.

Sergeant Gullion noted that the Armory has been a valuable resource to the BAPD as a training facility and hopes that continues.

Ms. Parker stated that the process of starting a nonprofit is easy and agrees that whoever operates the Armory must understand its unique function. It will also require costs to maintain the building, which is an historic one.

Mr. Richards stated that the Armory may not be a “moneymaker” but it shouldn’t drain the Town budget in the long term.

Mr. Small stated that having two foundations may be more realistic since the facilities have different missions. He also suggested a probation period for any new foundation that would manage the Armory and that all agreements are clearly written.

Ms. Heidenreich noted that the Armory is a complex that includes the incubator businesses and park. The needs of all need to be balanced.

Mr. Kline stated the DPW provides a lot of support to Rockfield.

Mayor Chmielewski asked if the Town has the means to support a new foundation until it operates independently. Ms. Moody said that this can be examined if the situation arises. The Town provided certain supports to the Rockfield Foundation for more than 10 years.

Mayor Chmielewski stated that Town use of the Armory might need to be examined.

Mr. Krantz suggested that several operating models could be explored.

Mayor Chmielewski and Mr. Richards noted that it would be important to start looking at options soon and move forward.

Mr. Bane stated that the Town has been exploring options since 2018, but none of these resulted in an agreement. It is an important building that already has a long-term lease with the school system. There are multiple items that will need negotiation with whomever decides to operate the facility. There are nonprofit models in similar towns that are currently successful. Parking has been a concern for some who have expressed interest.

Mr. Krantz suggested that a draft RFP be prepared for review by interested parties. Mr. Richards suggested that it could start small, e.g. an arts group would create a certain number of events for revenue sharing.

Mr. Bane stated that a work group that includes residents may be helpful in moving ideas forward. Mr. Richards expressed interest in having a role in future planning.

6. TOWN OF BEL AIR EMPLOYEE PENSION PLANS

In the interest in time, Mr. Bane suggested delaying discussion of the pension plan.

The meeting ended at 12:00 p.m.

Approved: March 15, 2021

Signature on file
Amy G. Chmielewski, Chair
Board of Town Commissioners

Signature on file
Michael L. Krantz, Town Clerk