

MINUTES
Town of Bel Air Focus Group for Comprehensive Strategic Planning
Meeting #3 Economic Development/Transportation
Wednesday May 19, 2021

The Bel Air Department of Planning convened a focus group to gather input for the upcoming comprehensive plan. This took place at 5:30 p.m. at Bel Air's Town Hall.

PRESENT:

Kim Austing, Bel Air Downtown Alliance
Ben Myer, Business Owner
Donna Dickey, Rockfield Foundation
Kimon Johnson, MDOT
Andrea Kestner, Bel Air Farmers Market
Vaugh Lewis, SHA Retiree/Resident
John Mettee/Rotary
Craig Miser, Harford Velo Cycling Club
Greg Pizzuto, Visit Harford
Lisa Sparr, Realtor/Resident

OTHERS PRESENT:

Rowan Glidden, Planner
Patti Parker, Community & Public Relations Manager
Kathi Santora, Recording Secretary
Rod Bourn, Owner of Down/Set/Lead

Mr. Bourn opened the meeting, introduced himself and described the focus group's purpose in the Town's strategic planning process. This is the third of four planned focus groups. This group will focus on Economic Development/Transportation. All attendees introduced themselves.

Mr. Bourn explained the SWOT analysis and its use to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as they relate to tonight's topic. He went on to use small and large group discussions to identify these.

He also later organized small groups to address the questions "What really needs to be addressed?" and "It would be really cool if . . ."

Strengths

- Local government county seat

- Small town environment
- Positive appearance of town
- Access to MA & PA Trail, pedestrian walkways and accessibility to roads
- Local resources that encourage and support small businesses
- Local group supports such as the Bel Air Downtown Alliance, Chamber of Commerce and Town Economic Development
- Social media and marketing collaboration among businesses
- Safe roads
- Low crime rate
- Variety of complementary businesses
- Events that include younger audiences, e.g. Skate Park, later hours of businesses
- Public transportation for seniors
- Public parking

Weaknesses

- Limited public transportation**
- Limited bike lanes/and access to safe bicycling on roads
- Traffic congestion, especially at peak travel times
- Limited infrastructure development/road development
- Infrastructure maintenance/cosmetics
- Vacant buildings**
- Limited outdoor dining
- Landlocked/limited growth area

Threats

- Over regulation could stifle business growth
- Lack of town staff growth**
- Uneven balance of local vs. corporate businesses
- Population density and overdevelopment
- Retail vacancies
- Funding shortfalls for business, beautification, maintenance, new initiatives, etc.

Opportunities

- Better Bike/pedestrian crossings especially US-1/MD-22
- Dedicated bike lanes/walking paths
- Better awareness of parking app
- More bike storage racks**
- More reliable transit/less circuitous routes
- Downtown walking loop**

- Vision plan for Bond Street**
- Relax restrictions that deter redevelopment **
- Vision plan for US-1

What really needs to be addressed

- Speed in Town
- Maintenance of empty storefronts
- Walking/Bike friendly paths
- Water feature/pool, lake, stream
- Height restrictions for new and redeveloped properties
- A dedicated team to onboard new businesses
- More youth activities
- More Town staff as needed

“It would be really cool if . . .”

- Building height restrictions were reevaluated to encourage redevelopment
- Town trolley
- Splash park/water feature**
- More trails for bikes
- Youth Center**
- Roller rink/activities for families with children
- Ability to close roads for events **

General Discussion comments: Mr. Bourn confirmed that the participants felt that the lists reflected their viewpoints. One participant asked for clarification of the “water feature” suggestion. Was it an attempt to build a community gathering space, such as a town square? Another participant noted that Bel Air doesn’t have any access to recreational water. A water feature attraction, such as a fountain or an interactive splash park, would draw people downtown. This could be surrounded by tables, water fountain, etc. that would build a sense of community and bring people together.

A discussion also focused on empty storefronts being both a weakness and an opportunity. As a weakness, many have a run-down appearance and are dirty.

A participant noted that public transportation should be a broad conversation to include buses, trolleys, bike paths/bike share and more.

**After compiling these lists, Mr. Bourn directed the group to each place a total of eight check marks next to the items in the SWOT analysis and “wish list” that are most important to him/her. These are the items that received three or more votes.

Mr. Bourn noted that these exercises have created the core of a strategic plan for the Bel Air Planning Department.

Mr. Bourn asked for final input. There was none. He expects that the group will reconvene in the fall or next year to report on resulting draft plans and to obtain additional feedback.

ADOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 7:10 p.m.