



WATERVILLE MAIN STREET
ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING COMMITTEE

FOCUS GROUPS: SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS
December, 2003

INTRODUCTION: In November of 2003 the Economic Restructuring Committee of Waterville Main Street conducted four focus group meetings with a total of twenty-nine downtown business and professional people. These groups were facilitated by ER Committee chairperson Greg Boyd and committee member Ben Sanborn. WMSt staff Shannon Haines (Executive Director), Joan Phillips-Sandy (Assistant Director) and June L'Heureux (Administrative Assistant) served as scribes. (A complete list of participants is at the end of this report.) Thomas College faculty member Pat Karush helped the committee develop the procedure and questions. This report includes the questions, summarizes the discussions and suggests action steps. WMSt is very grateful to all those who took the time to participate in this process in such a thoughtful and open manner.

- 1. What are your feelings about the general appearance of downtown? Is it adequately clean and are the public spaces well-kept? How about safety in the area?*

There was a very clear consensus that downtown is not clean and public spaces are not very well kept. Litter on the streets and City trash receptacles being used for residential trash were mentioned among the specific concerns. There were safety concerns primarily about ice and snow accumulation on sidewalks as well as concern about fast moving cars on Main St. Businesses seemed to think that the issue was one of shared responsibility with the City, and that property owners, businesses and the City could do better. The businesses that were represented at the focus groups generally felt they were taking care of their spaces, but that others often did not. Snow removal from downtown parking areas was also a concern.

SUGGESTED ACTION: Arrange a meeting with City officials and downtown business people to address these concerns and to develop solutions.

- 2. Do you perceive that a parking problem exists because employees are parking in prime customer spaces? If so, are there steps you would be willing to take to encourage employees to park elsewhere? Do you have any suggestions regarding how this problem might be resolved?*

Many employers already encourage their employees to park elsewhere, although parking remains a perceived problem. One interesting discovery was that when a Main Street business asks employees to park in the Concourse, they need to be careful not to take prime spots for businesses on or adjacent to the Concourse. Several people suggested that there be a return to a previous system wherein some Concourse spaces are designated for two hour parking and others for all day. Also, some participants thought there was a need

for some very short term parking spaces (e.g., twenty minutes) for people who are stopping at banks and professional offices

SUGGESTED ACTION: WMSt. should encourage the City to conduct a comprehensive traffic and parking study with significant input from downtown business people. The City recently received a \$500,000 grant for infrastructure work related to the Head of Falls development. Funding for a traffic study is part of that grant. Meanwhile, include a brief item in our January newsletter suggesting that employers encourage employees to make an effort to park in areas that are not prime customer spaces for theirs or any other business.

3. Do you have any interest in façade improvement? What about participating in a government grant application to improve facades downtown?

Those participants who owned their buildings were interested in this. And others who were renters might still be interested if the building owners were supportive. There was interest in design guidelines in an effort to foster a more attractive, and unified, appearance.

SUGGESTED ACTION: Apply for façade improvement grant funding and work with the WMSt Design Committee to implement a façade improvement plan, including design guidelines.

4. Are you aware of the City ordinances regarding signage downtown? (HANDOUT OF KEY POINTS IN THE ORDINANCES) Would you be in favor of changes to the City ordinances? What changes?

Not every group spent much time on this. Only a few were aware of the sign ordinance. There was some sentiment in favor of adopting a policy that might foster more attractive and uniform signage, although people realize that matters of good taste and attractiveness are subjective.

SUGGESTED ACTION: City Councillor T.J. Tavares was at one time working on a proposed new sign ordinance. We should suggest that he involve some representatives of downtown businesses and the WMSt Design Committee in the drafting stage.

5. Are you aware of the Waterville Development Corp. and their plans for developing the waterfront area? Do you have any concerns regarding their plans?

Although there was some general awareness of the WDC, there was not a clear awareness of what the plans were or at what stage. There was definitely concern about the potential impact of waterfront development on Main Street and a concern as to whether it would help or hurt.

SUGGESTED ACTION: Arrange a meeting with representatives of the WDC, the City and downtown business people to share information and concerns.

6. *Do you have an interest in informational meetings on business topics? If so, which of the following topics do you find appealing:*
energy efficiency
advertising
impact on business as a result of changes in the tax codes
marketing segmentation and positioning
window displays/interior store design
strategic planning
financial management
researching your customer base

Are there any other topics which are of interest to you?

There was some interest in this sort of thing but generally most people thought this was something that the Chamber did and we did not need to duplicate it.

SUGGESTED ACTION: Inform Kimberly Lindlof, CEO of the Mid-Maine Chamber of Commerce, that people think the Chamber is doing a good job with this.

7. *Do you think it would be beneficial to set up a mentoring program for new businesses in the downtown area? Would you be willing to act as a mentor?*

Although some people thought this might be helpful, there was limited interest in actually doing it.

SUGGESTED ACTION: None at this time.

8. *Are you interested in cooperative advertising, which would promote downtown as a destination for travelers in Maine?*

This drew mixed reaction, although retailers were generally more interested than others. It was important that any ads be well designed.

SUGGESTED ACTION: WMS should continue with efforts to arrange cooperative advertising (e.g. the Star 101 radio ads for the holidays, and summer sidewalk sales.)

9. *Do you think promoting Waterville as an arts/cultural center is a good idea? Would it improve the local economy? Would this orientation benefit your business?*

There was a generally positive reaction to promoting Waterville as an arts and cultural center, although there was a strong sense that what is most needed is more retail business downtown.

SUGGESTED ACTION: Continue Community Arts Initiative. Also, continue plans to develop a business recruitment plan. (See item # 12.)

10. When cultural events are taking place (plays, film and arts festivals), would you consider keeping your business open later in the evening, or changing your business hours to accommodate potential customers?

Retailers and restaurant owners had mixed feelings about this. In general there was a sense that for businesses to benefit, several stores need to be open. And for restaurants, the timing of events made a difference. Several of the restaurant owners noted that a 7 PM event at the Opera House does little for business, but an 8 PM event significantly improves business. (On the other hand, the Opera House finds that a 7 PM or 7:30 PM start time works better for their audiences.) There was a desire on the part of restaurant owners to be apprised of the Opera House schedule and after the meeting one of them contacted Opera House Executive Director Tom Misner.

SUGGESTED ACTION: confirm that the Opera House is keeping the restaurants informed and ask the restaurants to monitor increased business as a result of events. (This information would be useful in a business recruitment package aimed at restaurants.) We should encourage businesses to take advantage of times when there are events at the Opera House, perhaps with special sales and/or hours. Also, encourage restaurants, stores and the Opera House to work together to benefit both.

11. Do you think it would be beneficial for the local economy to have the downtown stores open late (until 8 P.M.) one night per week?

Some retailers remembered the days when Augusta stores stayed open one night each week and Waterville stores stayed open another. They seemed willing to discuss doing this if enough businesses were to agree.

SUGGESTED ACTION: Invite downtown retailers to get together and see if enough of them will agree to try staying open later one night/week, perhaps at limited times during the year. (A few already do this.) If enough retailers are interested in trying this, follow up to assess whether or not it is successful.

12. In conclusion, what further steps do you think WMS could take to further support existing businesses? What help do you need from us?

More business downtown was seen as a priority need. There was a general sense that people will come downtown if there is a reason to be here.

SUGGESTED ACTION: ER Committee should continue to develop and implement business recruitment plan in accordance with its previously adopted work plan.

Concluding Thoughts

It is wonderful that so many people were willing to take time to come and share their views with us. There is definitely interest in and support for downtown revitalization. There is a willingness on the part of the participants to help make things happen, but they see the need for broader participation (businesses, property owners and the City) if any efforts are to be successful. A key role for WMSt is to serve as a catalyst for keeping conversations going in an effort to bring people together to take action.

Arranging a meeting with the new City administration as soon as possible in the new year is an essential first step in implementing many of the suggestions arising from the focus group discussions. In terms of our own work plan, finalizing the Guide to Doing Business and developing a business recruitment package which includes baseline and building inventory data are also high priority items.

Readers of this report are reminded that the Economic Restructuring Committee is one of four active committees at Waterville Main Street. The others are Design, Promotion and Organization. Together they comprise the Four Points which are central to the Main Street Program. This incremental and cumulative approach to downtown revitalization has proven successful in Main Street communities throughout the United States. Waterville Main Street is one of the first four Main Street communities in Maine designated by the Maine Downtown Center.

FOCUS GROUP: Restaurants (Wednesday, November 12)

(Facilitator: Greg Boyd, ER Committee chairperson; scribe: Joan Phillips-Sandy, WMSt Assistant Director)

Scott Massey (Steve's Restaurant)
Mark Joseph (Steve's Restaurant)
Marianne Butak (Bagel Mainea)
Joe Plumstead (Last Unicorn)
Michelle Cyr (Last Unicorn)
Janice Swinton (Freedom Café)
Linda Khuu (Mei Chow)

FOCUS GROUP: Banks, investment, insurance, attys., financial planning (Wed., November 12)

(Facilitator: Ben Sanborn, ER Committee member; scribe: Joan Phillips-Sandy)

Allan Rancourt (Kennebec Federal Savings Bank)
David Geller (Geller Law Offices)
John Fortier (State Farm Insurance)
Bill Mitchell (GHM Insurance)
Mike Phillips (Phillips & Bernier, Attorneys)
Suzanne Uhl-Melanson (Edward Jones, Co.)
Rick Tonge (Rick Tonge Investments)

FOCUS GROUP: Media, entertainment, design, arts, etc. (Thursday, November 13)

(Facilitator: Ben Sanborn; scribe: June L'Heureux, WMSt Administrative Assistant)

Tom Misner (Exec. Director, Waterville Opera House)
Karen Heck (director, Hardy Girls, Healthy Women)
Luke Duplessis (owner, Mainely Brews)

FOCUS GROUP: Retail (Thursday, November 13)

(Facilitator: Greg Boyd; scribe: Shannon Haines, WMSt Executive Director)

Paula Gordon (Maine Made & More)
Jill Vigue (Adams & Worth)
Jean Sturtevant (The Clothing Gallery)
Kathy Corey (Day's Fine Jewelers)
Mark Larsen (Larsen's Jewelry)
Michael Giroux (Berry's Stationers)
Michelle Giroux (Berry's Stationers)
Robert Sezak (RE-BOOKS)
Ken Vlodek (Yardgoods Center)
Robert Stevenson (SBS Carbon Copy)
Martha Stevenson (SBS Carbon Copy)
Andrew Oliver (Joe's Smoke Shop and the Levine's building)