

MEETING REPORT NO. 08

PROJECT: **Town of Needham Downtown Study**

DATE: 28 February 2007

LOCATION: Community Room, Needham Public Library

PRESENT: Downtown Study Committee (DSC)

Kate Fitzpatrick	Town Manager
Jack Cogswell	Chairman, Board of Selectmen
Jerry Wasserman	Board of Selectmen
Bob Smart	Cochair, Planning Board
Moe Handel	Cochair, Planning Board
Lee Newman	Planning Director
Nicole Bourassa	Assistant Planner
Joyce Moss	Economic Development Officer
Mark Gluesing	Design Review Board
Peter Fugere	Needham Housing Authority
Kathy Lewis	Needham Business Association
Paul Good	Chair, Needham Community Revitalization Committee
John McQuillan	Business Owner
Bob Hentschel	Property Owner
Peter Friedenber	Citizen at Large
Martin Batt	Citizen at Large

DiNisco Design Partnership (DDP)

Kenneth DiNisco
Richard Rice
Jon Oxman

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1. The purpose of this meeting was to review a preliminary list of Community Goals and Objectives for each of the Sub Study Areas as well as the Study Area overall. This discussion will be concluded at the next meeting.

2. COMMUNITY GOALS & OBJECTIVES

- 2.1. The Community Goals and Objectives handout was discussed with the DSC. See attached copy. Comments made by the DSC have been incorporated into a revised version of this text that is attached to Meeting Report #09. Additional points of discussion include the following:

2.2. Study Area Overall

- 2.2.1. Traffic – The fact that major traffic arterials run through Downtown can't be changed. This is a common pattern as was compared with Lexington, Natick and Wellesley. What can be done is to mitigate the adverse impacts of traffic and allow for safe and convenient pedestrian circulation.
- 2.2.2. Parking – Downtown would benefit from the consolidation of existing off-street parking and making it more available to the public. The Chestnut Street lot is good example where existing off-street parking across several different parcels has been consolidated through the use of easements.
- 2.2.3. Parcel Consolidation – Bob Smart said parcel consolidation should not be a goal.
- 2.2.4. Vision as an Implementation Tool – Paul Good gave examples of his work with the Needham Community Revitalization Committee where visualizations of potential improvements can be used to convince property and business owners to invest in these improvements, such as the improvements to the “Chadwick Coal” alleyway to Needham Center Station.
- 2.2.5. Signage – Signage is not regulated by the Design Review Board, but under its own Town bylaw. In some cases there is a conflict between the signage bylaw and the Needham's Design Guidelines for Business Districts such as allowing projecting signs.

Town traffic signage needs to be better coordinated for both safety – some signage is too low and for appearance – signs should be better coordinated and not so cluttered.

- 2.2.6. Incentives and Town Services – The Town, property owners and businesses all have to share in the required investment to revitalize Downtown. There are various mechanisms for raising funds, but they all require an increase in the tax base. Jack Cogswell said the town has previously tried to implement a Business Improvement District with tax increment financing which failed.

Other incentives at the Town's disposal include offering increased de to offer services such as snow plowing. John McQuillan pointed out that Town previously had a patrolman Downtown and cleaned streets better.

2.3. Center Business District

2.3.1. Storefront Improvements – Paul Good related work he is doing with the Needham Revitalization Committee to improve storefronts on a block-by-block approach with unifying elements, such as awnings and coordinating signage. These are opportunities for short-term improvements, within the control of property owners, that can serve as catalysts for further improvements. One example is the block on the south side of Great Plain Avenue between Chestnut Street and the tracks.

2.3.2. Parking – Additional commuter parking at the Needham Center Station should not be encouraged and would be better to be directed to the three other stations, Needham Heights, Needham Junction and Hersey.

Lee Newman said that there is the potential at Walgreens and adjacent lots for consolidating off-street parking similar to the Chestnut Street Parking Lot discussed above.

3. PROJECT SCHEDULE

3.1. A Project Schedule was handed out. See attached copy.

4. NEXT MEETINGS

4.1. The DSC will meet at 7:30 AM on Tuesday 06 March. Please note that this meeting will be at Town Hall in the Selectmen's meeting room instead of the Library. The purpose of this meeting will be to conclude the discussion of Community Goals and Objectives and review the Project Schedule.

The discussions of this meeting are recorded as understood by the writer. Please advise the writer of any omissions or corrections.



Jon Oxman AIA
DiNISCO DESIGN

JAO/

cc: DSC
Kenneth DiNisco
Richard Rice

Enclosure: 1. Text: Community Goals and Objectives (02/26/07).
2. Schedule: Project Schedule (02/26/07).

Community Goals

In 2004 a Community Development Plan was developed that identified a Vision Statement for the Town that focuses on "... how to preserve and enhance the town's amenities and assure that its present diversity and civic character are retained and enhanced..." serving the "... contemporary needs that improve the quality of life for the residents that live, work, shop and meet in the downtown."

This Vision Statement was reinforced by a well attended Community Workshop on December 11, 2006 which assembled at the Broadmeadow School to discuss community goals in connection with this study. The diverse group representing various interests (business owners, property owners, residents) were organized into smaller discussion groups. The outcome of that meeting is recorded on a summary chart which records the responses of each group, breadth of support and consensus support for each identified issue.

Refer to Attachment No. 1 – Results of Community Workshop Number One.

The interaction and interest of workshop participants demonstrated a healthy mix of people, businesses and organizations dedicated to an informed, active and civic based planning process.

Best Features

Every group identified a "Center Focus" which carried different meanings to each participant, but in general it refers to a sense of place dominated by the civic presence of Town Hall and Town Common including adjoining commercial properties.

The second feature with broad base of support was commuter trains although in further discussion on desired improvements this received little or no attention except for negative comments about the surface crossings as part of the traffic commentary.

Worst Features

Those features identified as deficient or lacking were the diversity of stores, streetscape, housing and community space. Business and property owners referenced the zoning process and ways to expedite the development process.

Desired Improvements

The strongest support for desired improvements was mixed use, residential development in the downtown, village improvements, a community center and user friendly permitting. Notable for its relative silence is the issue of parking, although focus group discussion of adequate and strategically located parking was abundant, it didn't emerge as a pressing issue in the final evaluation.

Themes/Consensus

Various themes described as goals or objectives emerged throughout the Community Workshop process and were summarized in a subsequent meeting with the Downtown Study Committee. Quotes from DSC members:

“There was a clear and consistent expression that the Center focus and the train are the best features of downtown”.

“There is a common voiced desire for a “village environment”.

A reference to “good demographics” alludes to affluent Town residents as a base of support for additional retail/restaurant redevelopment.

A synopsis of these views are broken down into each business district as follows.

CENTER BUSINESS DISTRICT

Needham Center has been historically the center of civic and commercial enterprise servicing the residents of Needham. There is a broad acceptance of this unique asset with the explicit desire to make it more vibrant, diverse and livable. It should embrace a village atmosphere with improved streetscapes, landscaping and signage. Pedestrians who live, shop and work in the downtown support local merchants and dine at outdoor cafes. Community performances, art exhibits and fairs bring life and vitality to the downtown especially at night and weekends. The commuter train continues to provide easy access to Boston, and is an attractive and welcome alternative to the automobile.

To fulfill this vision the Development Plan must articulate the following goals and a strategy for implementation.

Mixed Use/Residential Development

- Provide a diversity of housing for a broad range of economic and life style choices not presently available in Needham. Encourage an appropriate mix of retail, office and housing appropriate to location and context.
- Encourage development by user friendly permitting, transparent design guidelines and over-lay district zoning that set forth clear opportunities rather than restrictions.
- Recognize that the economics of development rely on opportunities that can be quickly identified, evaluated and acted upon in a timely manner.

Civic Center

- Enhance, preserve and expand the civic presence of Town Hall and Town Common. Provide community space in or adjacent to Town Hall as a strong statement of public commitment to the downtown.
- Provide public parking for town employees that does not conflict or compete with desired curbside parking for convenience of shopping.

Improvements

- Establish new standards for pedestrian access that are aesthetically pleasing, safe, and encourage window shopping and outdoor dining.
- Encourage user friendly signage regulations that complement village landscaping.
- Promote consistent storefront treatment, using a diversity of suggested alternatives and possible economic incentives.
- Develop an economic climate for business and property owners to improve storefronts.

Smart Growth

- Identify strategies and/or funding sources that offer incentives or partnerships in the development of transit oriented development. While this is an emerging opportunity that will inevitably change and vary for each community, the potential for economic incentive is great.

Gateway to Needham Center

- The predominant traffic flow into Needham Center is along Highland Avenue where it converges at the Chapel Street intersection and the Needham Service Center. It is a natural gateway announcing the arrival to Needham Center celebrated in a most inappropriate manner.

Traffic/Parking

- Efficient traffic flow, reduced congestion, limited curb cuts and appropriate, but inobtrusive parking are essential to the village infrastructure. The lifeline of merchants is convenient parking (curb size, parking lots, etc.) and a lack of congestion.
- Review and recommend solutions for the gateway at Chapel Street and Highland Avenue, and the dangerous intersection where Dedham Avenue meets Great Plain Avenue.

HIGHLAND AVENUE BUSINESS DISTRICT

Gateway to Needham

From Route 128 to Needham Heights to Needham Center, Highland Avenue is a corridor that emerges at the Town Library and Memorial Park, and formally announces the arrival into Needham. It is a mixture of civic, institutional and commercial properties with a reasonably well defined street edge, with only a few strip mall layouts. The quality of buildings is consistently good and with a few exceptions, fairly new.

- Reinforce and further define usage for compatible civic, residential, commercial and institutional use.
- Discourage use of parking lots which front on Highland Avenue.
- Maintain Emery Grover and other significant Town properties for municipal or housing use.
- Define the streetscape at Rosemary Street/Highland Avenue intersection to reinforce the entry into Needham.

CHESTNUT STREET BUSINESS DISTRICT

Unlike the other business districts, Chestnut Street is ill-defined as a built environment with various building sizes, set backs and heights. It is saturated with surface parking (mostly private) without any consistent pattern and numerous curb cuts.

The uses are equally varied and include:

Public Safety Building

Hospital

Nursing Home

Office Space

Mixed Retail

Car Dealership

Supermarket

Junction Train Station

Improvements

- Develop a clear identity of usage and development.
- Prepare consistent standards for building types, setbacks and building heights.
- Establish signage and storefront design standards.
- Consider development of Junction Station for a park and ride site as part of a smart growth design initiative.

Attachment 1 – Results of Community Workshop #1

METHODOLOGY

The first Community Workshop was held on December 11, 2006 at the Broadmeadow School. Approximately 100 people participated including 78 citizens from Needham, 16 members of the Downtown Study Committee and 5 members of the Study Team. In addition the workshop was broadcast on the local cable TV, the Needham Channel. The purpose of this workshop was to present an overview of the Downtown Study and gather community input to identify Community Goals and Objectives.

The workshop began with introductions and a brief presentation outlining the scope of this study. Participants were then divided into 8 focus groups organized by their self-identified stake-holder interest in Downtown Needham: business owners, property owners, residents living near downtown and residents at large.

Committee members facilitated the focus group discussions. Each focus group was to discuss and prioritize their responses to the following three questions:

- What are the three best features of Downtown Needham?
- What are the three worst features of Needham Center?
- If you could do two things to improve Needham Center, what would they be?

The responses to the above questions were recorded on flip charts. During the final segment of the workshop the flip charts were displayed to the group as a whole and a representative from each focus group presented their responses.

Following the presentations all participants were given the opportunity to vote on the responses from any of the focus groups. Participants were given four red dots to stick next to any one of more responses they most strongly agreed with and one blue dot to place next to any one response they most strongly disagreed with.

ANALYSIS

Responses were sorted by issue and voting was tabulated to identify what the community sees as the best features and worst features of Downtown Needham and what improvements have the most support. Results are summarized in the attached chart. Responses were evaluated both for the breadth of support – those responses most often given and by voting score, both as a total score of blue dots and red dots and a net score – red dots minus blue dots.

Based on the above quantitative analysis, the top ranking issues are listed below:

Best Features

- Center Focus
- Two Commuter Train Stations

Worst Features

- Diversity of Stores
- Deficiencies of Streetscape
- Zoning – Frustrations with Permitting / Approvals Process
- Lack of Housing
- Lack of Community Spaces

Improvements

- Mixed Use / Residential Development
- Community Center
- Village Environment

The results of the community workshop were reviewed and discussed by the Downtown Study Committee at their meeting on January 10, 2007. A summary of this discussion is included below for clarification and further articulation of the above results. Because the makeup of the Committee is representative of the stakeholder participants at the workshop the comments below provide additional insight into the responses summarized above.

Best Features

- Good Demographics – This refers to the demographics of Town residents as being affluent and that this is a base of support for additional retail / restaurant development. There also appears to be a commonality that residents want to see improvements as evidenced by strong participation in this workshop with a broad diversity of interests. There is a common voiced desire for a “village environment”.
- Center Focus / Train – There was a clear and consistent expression that both the Center Focus and the Train are the best features of Downtown.

Worst Features

- Disincentives for Property Upkeep – This issue was raised regarding the low threshold for triggering the requirement for special permits. For example, a façade upgrade to an existing storefront would trigger a special permit and business owners feel the regulatory review process is more burdensome than appropriate for this type of project.
- Empty Storefronts – This issue made the final cut in two groups. For Group 4 this issue conveyed that restrictive zoning was the cause of empty space.

- Inconsistency Of Architecture – This issue from Group 6 is a reference to the buildings.
- Lack Of Building Scale – This issue from Group 6 is a reference to height.
- Poor Road & Sidewalk Conditions – Group 8 was specifically referencing the bad conditions at Chestnut Street.
- Lack of Clothing Stores – 25 years ago Needham had four men’s clothing stores, all of which were lost over the course of four years. The question was raised why this happened if there is the apparent demand for this then, but not now.
- Diversity Of Stores – It was clarified that blue dots voted on this issue were in support of more diversity of stores.
- Zoning – This is really two issues: one is restrictive zoning and the other is a frustration with the permitting process.

Desired Improvements

- Hire Community Development Officer – This suggestion was in response to the issue of Empty Storefronts and was meant to convey that the Town should take a proactive role in working with developers to improve downtown. It was pointed out that Norwood is an example of one community that has benefited from a Community Development Officer.
- Greene’s Field Proposal – This issue proposed a multi-use public facility with a YMCA, Theater, Youth and Senior Center components along with underground parking at Greene’s Field. In the analysis discussed above, the Greene’s Field Proposal was originally combined with Mixed-use / Residential Development, but has been revised to be a separate issue categorized as Community Center as discussed below. There was also opposition expressed against this proposal – the reason given being the loss of green space at that portion of Greene’s Field fronting Great Plain Avenue.
- Community Center – Based on discussion with the DSC it was decided that the Greene’s Field Proposal was more appropriate to be categorized as the desire for a Community Center. The desire for a Community Center was raised as an issue in Group 4 but didn’t make final cut.
- Decongest the Center – Traffic / Parking – This issue made the final cut for Group 4, but there were no red dots supporting it and 3 blue dots voting against it. Group 4 also did not want additional development in downtown.
- Livelier And Cleaner Downtown – This issue refers to the participants’ view that the Town needs to be more responsible for maintaining the public way.
- Evening Activities – This issue came up in more groups than final flip charts suggest.

- Mixed – Use Projects / Locations for Socializing – Consistent with the public’s desire for mixed-use projects and a community center downtown, is the desire amongst Town residents for convenient locations for socializing. Mixed-use projects will be great for providing these opportunities but the schedule for these projects will be controlled by developers and most likely are a 10-15 year time frame. In addition to the Greene’s Field location, other possibilities include Walgreens site, the theater block and a project involving a parking structure at the Needham Junction site that would be shared with a new YMCA adjacent to it. In the meantime there should be more immediate action to provide locations for socializing.

More immediate possibilities include renovation of Town Hall to include community space. The Selectmen have postponed their decision on Town Hall renovations pending the conclusions of this study.

Attachment #2 - Community Workshop #1 - Summary of Results

Breadth of Support For Issue	Issues	Group # 1 Business Owners		Group # 2 Property Owners		Group # 3 Property Owners		Group # 4 Residents Near Center		Group # 5 Residents Near Center		Group # 6 Residents at Large		Group # 7 Residents at Large		Group # 8 Residents "Sort of" Near Center		TOTALS			
		Red Dots	Blue Dots	Red Dots	Blue Dots	Red Dots	Blue Dots	Red Dots	Blue Dots	Red Dots	Blue Dots	Red Dots	Blue Dots	Red Dots	Blue Dots	Red Dots	Blue Dots	Red Dots	Blue Dots	Net	
	Best Features																				
*****	1 Walkability	0	0							1	0							1	0	1	
*****	2 Center Focus	3	0	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	12	0	0	0	5	0	28	0	28	
*****	3 Train	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		1	0	3	0	3		
	4 Good Demographics			0	0												0	0	0		
	5 Diversity of Stores					0	(6)					1	0			2	(1)	3	(7)	(4)	
	6 Outdoor Dining							0	0								0	0	0		
	7 Convenient Parking									1	(1)						1	(1)	0		
	8 Sense of Community													1	0		1	0	1		
	TOTALS	4	0	5	0	4	(6)	0	0	2	(1)	13	0	1	0	8	(1)	37	(8)	29	
	Worst Features																				
	1 No Evening Activities	0	(1)														0	(1)	(1)		
	2 Limited Expansion	0	0														0	0	0		
***	3 Diversity of Stores	0	(1)	3	(3)							5	(1)	4	0	1	(1)	13	(6)	7	
	4 Zoning - Not to Full Potential					15	0	1	0								16	0	16		
	5 Lack of Housing			8	0									10	0		18	0	18		
	6 Public Infrastructure					1	0										1	0	1		
	7 Disincentive for Upkeep					2	0										2	0	2		
	8 Traffic							1	0			0	(1)				1	(1)	0		
	9 Empty Storefronts							1	0	1	0						2	0	2		
**	10 Streetscape							2	0	4	(3)	0	(4)	0	0		6	(7)	(1)		
	11 Community Space									0	0					20	0	20	0	20	
	12 Road & Sidewalk Conditions															4	0	4	0	4	
	TOTALS	0	(2)	26	(3)	4	0	4	0	5	(3)	5	(6)	14	0	25	(1)	83	(15)	68	
	Desired Improvements																				
**	1 Mixed Use / Residential Development	7	(3)									15	0	12	0		34	(3)	31		
	2 Community Center													23	(13)		23	(13)	10		
	3 Storefront Aesthetics	2	0														2	0	2		
	4 Parking			1	0							3	(1)				4	(1)	3		
	5 Zoning			0	0					3	0						3	0	3		
	6 User Friendly Permitting					20	0										20	0	20		
	7 Renovate Town Hall Offices					3	(5)										3	(5)	(2)		
	8 Traffic							0	(3)								0	(3)	(3)		
	9 Community Development Officer							5	0								5	0	5		
**	10 Village Improvements									11	1	12	0			4	0	27	1	28	
	TOTALS	9	(3)	1	0	23	(5)	5	(3)	14	1	30	(1)	35	(13)	4	0	121	(24)	97	

PROJECT SCHEDULE	Start Date	Finish Date	2007									
			February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November
TOWN MEETING	5/14/07					◆◆						
SPECIAL TOWN MEETING	11/5/07						May 9, 14 & 16					◆ Mon, Nov 5
10 % SURVEY OF EXISTING CONDITIONS	2/21/07	4/8/07	[Blue Bar]									
Existing Land Use												
Ownership Patterns												
Visual Assessment of Building Conditions												
Traffic, Parking and Streetscape												
Market Trends												
Committee Meeting	2/28/07			◆ Wed, Feb 28 AM								
10% IDENTIFICATION OF COMMUNITY GOALS	2/21/07	2/23/07	[Blue Bar]									
Committee Meeting	4/4/07				◆ Wed, Apr 4 PM	Review of Vision & Existing Conditions						
25% CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT PLAN	3/1/07	5/31/07	[Blue Bar]									
Three Alternative Scenarios												
Committee Meeting	4/25/07					◆ Wed, Apr 25 PM	Review of Preliminary Alternative Scenarios					
Guidelines for Mixed-Use, Downtown District												
Traffic, Parking & Streetscape Improvements												
Zoning Plan												
Economic Development Implementation												
Draft Plan to Committee	5/16/07						◆ Wed, May 16					
Committee Meeting	5/23/07						◆ Wed, May 23	Review of Draft Plan				
Committee Meeting	6/6/07							◆ Wed, Jun 6	Review of Revised Draft Plan & Community Workshop Preparation			
Community Workshop	6/18/07								◆ Mon, Jun 18 PM			
Public Feedback	6/18/07	6/25/07							[Blue Bar]			
Committee Meeting	6/27/07								◆ Wed, Jun 27	Discuss Workshop Feedback & Direction for Comprehensive Plan		
45% COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT	7/1/07	8/15/07							[Blue Bar]			
Design												
Circulation & Parking Plan												
Committee Meeting	7/11/07								◆ Wed, Jul 11	Review of Final Design Plan, Circulation and Parking Plan		
Design Guidelines												
Zoning Plan												
Cost Analysis & Economic Impact												
Economic Implementation Strategy												
10% REPORT												
Draft Report	8/1/07	8/15/07								[Blue Bar]		
Committee Review	8/15/07	8/29/07								[Blue Bar]		
Committee Meeting	8/29/07									◆ Wed, Aug 29 PM	Review of Draft Report	
Committee Meeting	9/5/07										◆ Wed, Sept 5 PM	
Public Presentation	9/17/07											◆ Mon, Sept 17
Final Report	9/17/07	10/17/07									[Blue Bar]	
Presentation to Special Town Meeting	11/5/07											◆ Mon, Nov 5
			February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November
			2007									