

Economic Development Advisory Committee

2.04.09 Meeting notes

BOS Meeting room

Present:

Rich Ball, Cirtronics Corp.
Tracy Bardsley, Do-it
Brad Chappell, Chappell Tractor
Matt Ciardelli, Ciardelli Fuel Co
Chris Costantino, Conservation Commission
George Infanti, Milford Paint & Wallpaper
Heather Leach, Centrix Bank
Tim O'Connell, Butternut Farms
Tom Sapienza, Hampshire Hills Sports Club
Sean Trombly, Trombly Gardens
Dale White, Leighton A White, Inc

Bill Parker, Director Community Development
Mike Putnam, BOS representative
John McCormack, TIFD representative

Shirley Wilson, Recording secretary

T. Sapienza opened the meeting at 7:40AM.

Review of agenda and meeting notes:

January 21st

T. O'Connell inquired about the acronym CDBG. B. Parker answered Community Development Block Grant.

J. McCormack made a motion to accept the minutes. G. Infanti seconded and all in favor.

January 26th

T. Sapienza stated that last week's meeting was a very informative session.

H. Leach mentioned that she showed the Bradler building on the oval to Jack and will be setting up a meeting with Jack and Do-it to work on that. A brief discussion pertaining to the available buildings on the oval followed.

J. McCormack agreed that the presentation was very informative. Jack Dugan was very busy with his other efforts and referenced Jack's comment about not having time to do the door knocking himself, but to come to him with a prospect and he would help access the funding sources. The key is to start pushing ideas.

R. Ball made a motion to accept the minutes. B. Chappell seconded and all in favor.

Identify SWOT Strengths – Weaknesses – Opportunities – Threats to build Economic Development Vision.

T. Sapienza suggested that we develop a draft of the vision statement and build off the SWOT analysis to identify the strengths unique to Milford, the threats such as competition from other communities and the environment and determine what opportunities we have. B. Parker said he and Janet Langdell of the Planning Board decided on May as an arbitrary date in order to get something before the Board of Selectmen as soon as possible so they could start prioritizing how they want to deal with economic development. T. Sapienza said the deliverable will be a vision statement and then a series of action items and timeframe.

M. Ciardelli asked where we have jurisdiction and what can and can't we do. Do we have any direct say if we receive any economic stimulus money and will the Board of Selectmen have to submit this to the taxpayers? B. Parker stated that the Selectmen make the decision and hopefully this group would want to submit recommendations should we get economic stimulus money as to what we see as the best course of action to

benefit economic development. G. Infanti said that usually there is something in the warrant each year giving the Selectmen the right to expend funds without necessarily going before the voters. B. Parker said this group could recommend short term, goals and long range strategies. J. McCormack said that the TIF committee made recommendations to the Selectmen which resulted in warrant articles that went before the voters; one for zoning changes which passed and one giving authority to the Select Board for expenditure of money which did not pass.

R. Ball asked if this group agreed with the economic development definition appearing on today's agenda. Is this what we're going to agree to and aim our vision at or is there something else? It seems that defining the economic development statement is really the issue and our vision should tie into that. If we all agree, that is very prescriptive of how to proceed here with the things that we list as positives and negatives. R. Ball said that the definition on the agenda contains items that are very relevant; retain jobs, provide a stable tax base, promote economic betterment, and improve human development. We should be recommending things that will address those issues directly and not get channeled on any one particular issue. T. Sapienza said this committee has already spent a huge amount of time discussing the Brox property. That certainly is a home run, but do we want to base the whole game waiting for that big inning? Our time was well spent but that is not the only dominant issue; we have to become broader and more encompassing. The committee was in agreement to use the definition listed on the agenda.

B. Chappell said we have more to figure out before we even get to a SWOT analysis. Regardless of what we recommend, does the Town really want growth? The ten year old Master Plan looked at new homes as tax negative and also put a direct action on making Milford more industry ready such as extending infrastructure. What has been done other than setting up the TIF district? We have bigger issues and if we set up a plan to grow, will the town accept it? Does the town still feel negative about housing? B. Parker replied that may not necessarily be true. The thought ten years ago was that new homes generated two or three school age children when in reality it is more like .45 children and our schools do have the capacity for growth. J. McCormack said we are trending the other way and our school enrollment will be decreasing if we are not a little more proactive on encouraging affordable housing. B. Chappell said at the first roundtable there was a consensus on the amount of constraint that this town has. Do we deal with the realities or do we just come up with some suggestions and let it go. T. Sapienza said the environment has changed somewhat in ten years. The general population may be willing to create more jobs and opportunities in this economy; however, will that be enough? B. Chappell reiterated that this change needs to come from top down or it won't happen. J. McCormack said it has to go both ways; to create a vision and then draw back and get reaction to use in the process. Things not only have changed from ten years ago, but from two or three years ago. The atmosphere now can be more comparable to 1993 which was a down time and the economics are more like what we face today. It is inevitable no matter what we come up with, that there will be people who are against growth. B. Parker said it is the role of this group to say that proper economic growth can be good for the town and part of this group's charge is to come up with recommendations and support to convince the Selectmen to move forward on economic development and for the Planning Board to incorporate that in the Master Plan. We may be able to convince the town through the recommendations we submit and alleviate that anti growth philosophy. B. Chappell added that growth directly affects every one of our businesses; new houses mean new loans and will need paint, fuel and construction materials.

R. Ball said several issues have just been brought up that should go to the board; growth and traffic. Traffic could then be broken down into three categories; maintain existing roads, put in major access roads to take some pressure off the center of town, or let roads deteriorate and we'll become a backwards community because that is what the desire for the future really is. We should list the things that could be effective, take an informed position and then create that into a vision statement. Our visions may be very different from each others because we are a diverse group.

H. Leach said that our charge doesn't necessarily state to just bring new business to town; part of it is to retain existing businesses and make sure they can operate here in a safe and secure way. What do we need to do keep businesses already here so they can maintain and grow their business in Milford? J. McCormack referenced the proposed expansion of Hendrix Wire and Cable and said they were very appreciative of how responsive the whole process was in terms of town planning and what it would take to go ahead with the project. Being flexible and responsive to existing businesses is a good point. We wouldn't want to loose what we have.

B. Chappell said the number one thing that drove the economy down was housing, no matter how you cut it. J. McCormack brought up the LandQuest proposal and said those early TIF minutes should be shared. At the Brox property, they offered to be responsible for the infrastructure for the mixed use proposal that over time would include 500 residential units. All the issues related to schools and whether the tax impact would be positive or negative and what we wanted the conservation to look like surfaced.

T. Sapienza said doing nothing is also a strategy and our recommendation would be to keep going the way we are. There are obviously aspects of Milford that we like and wouldn't want to change, it's not all doom and gloom but are there things we could improve? B. Chappell again asked what happens if we come up with a recommendation and nothing happens. G. Infanti said from his experience there will always be a vocal minority that will be negative about everything. If we can come together with strong economic plan, back it up with documentation and sell it, we know the majority of the people will follow. With the support of the Board of Selectmen and proper documentation to back it up, an economic development plan can fly. Milford's strengths far outweigh the weaknesses. J. McCormack said looking along the 101A corridor, growth is happening and it is coming west. We have a chance to influence the direction and character of that growth now.

STRENGTHS

- Unique downtown
 - The oval is engrained in people's minds
 - Useful and aesthetic qualities
 - Logistically located
- School system and the technical part of the high school
- Good core diversified businesses
 - Existing resources at hand
 - Supportive environment
- Diverse town
- Very supportive and progressive planning dept
 - Willing to work with developers
- Railroad
- Great recreational programs and facilities,
 - Children's programs, Boys and Girls Club
 - Hampshire Hills facility and dome
- Cultural opportunities, situated close to Manchester, Nashua and Boston,
 - The drive in
- The Souhegan River
- More affordable housing compared to surrounding communities
- Milford's location, near the coast, mountains and lakes
- Tax structure is appealing compared to Massachusetts.
- Hampshire Hills facility and dome
 - Weekend events
- Low crime
- Open Space and major tracts of connecting land
- Farms and agriculture
 - River bottom land and quarries are a unique combination
- Physical attractiveness
 - High maintenance of public properties
- State of the art water and sewer system

Discussion:

R. Ball said looking at Hilton Homes and the amount of apartment complexes, good or bad, we have a lot more affordable housing, but the question remains, what is affordable housing?

H. Leach said our competition is Fitchburg and communities in northern Massachusetts and we should promote the no sales tax and no income tax. S. Trombly said it was brought up at the roundtable that employers can't bring in employees from other areas because that while we don't have taxes; we are high in fees for services.

T. Sapienza said Hampshire Hills with the combination of the dome and the facilities is very unique for this area and he was surprised that it was not even mentioned in the marketing package for Brox. He then said that we have had discussion on what carrots can be offered by Milford, but challenged everybody to find out what carrots can businesses give to other businesses? Look at such things as discounts, meeting space, and programs. Will a business come in to Milford just because of that? No, but maybe they will if there is a whole community of businesses welcoming other businesses. Maybe the sum of all the parts makes us unique, or do we have to get outside the box to figure out what to do. How aggressive can we be to make ourselves unique? Businesses can band together to encourage other business without taxpayer or Selectmen approval. B. Parker said events at the Hampshire Hills dome draw people from out of town that in turn, brings activity to other businesses. Maybe that will be a factor in bringing a hotel or motel to town and discussion on possible locations. T. Sapienza said this group has to emphasize that nobody wants development so much that it would affect our quality of life. We want the town to know that whatever recommendations are made, we also have to speak to those important issues. He referenced snowshoeing at the Brox property and said that there has to be a balance between development and open space and trails.

J. McCormack read several of the strengths listed by the partnership program:

Milford does much to ensure its physical attractiveness. Streets, sidewalks, parks, and etc, and all are maintained more vigorously...

Milford maintains publicly owned property more vigorously...including involving its arts community in the design of open space

Business services that are highly capable of working with emerging technical firms

M. Putnam said we've been talking about marketing, but as a Selectman he is looking at economic development. What do we have to do to increase the tax base and offset taxes to the residents down the road? One of the ways may be to bring business in with low impact on services but brings in more taxes. Where do we want to put them? What will it look like? What does the Board of Selectmen have to do to make this happen; tax incentives, zoning changes, more workforce housing. We know the strengths and weaknesses but what needs to be done at the Selectmen's level. There are businesses that will operate on well and septic if we can tweak the fire code; we could bring something in that doesn't need fire suppression or a 12" main. That way we don't have millions of dollars going in on the Brox property, but still get income coming in.

S. Trombly said part of the problem is that permits and design changes are very costly. The permit and planning process is too cumbersome. G. Infanti said a lot of that comes down from the state. M. Putnam asked if we could pioneer some changes at the state level. B. Parker said we still identify those things so we can address them. Although Mike has an understanding of what the strengths and weaknesses are, as a whole going back to the issue of going top down, the mindset has never been to push for economic development. This group however, can come up with specific recommendations that the Selectmen can buy into; for example, extending water and sewer along Rte 13 to the Data Products building in order to fully develop that site. T. Sapienza said talking about our strengths is actually marketing; however, this is a way to make sure everybody is on the same page covering all our strengths, weaknesses and threats. Then we would look at our opportunities which is how we come up with recommendations for the Selectmen.

M. Putnam disagreed saying we should attack it from a different viewpoint. We have to identify what is available and where it goes and what to do to attract businesses.

T. Bardsley said we don't have to reinvent the wheel. There have been numerous communities in New Hampshire where a lot of this work has been done, such as Portsmouth and the Pease Air force base. Londonderry is looking at shovel ready projects. Berlin, Manchester and Nashua all have economic development plans. Although they are different situations, we can still look at their processes, get ideas and choose what fits us.

WEAKNESSES

– Downtown

- Lack of parking
- Logistics of having to through and around the oval
- Railroad
 - Needs work
 - No stop
 - No service
- Lack of hotel
- Reactive not proactive
- Approval, regulatory and permitting processes are cumbersome for businesses
 - Costly
 - Timeliness
- Lack of communication and cooperation between boards and commissions
- Internet and infrastructure

Discussion:

H. Leach said Milford has been reactive. We try to fit businesses in, but we have not been proactive in making Milford ready for them to come in. Our weaknesses should be things that we are trying to fix. J. McCormack again referenced LandQuest saying that was indeed a very reactive environment.

S. Trombly said the approval process is at times a fight and referenced the proposed cemetery project. J. McCormack added timeliness is an issue and referenced the Partnership program concerns. *Overall Milford does poorly in the “The timeliness of approvals” section doing worse than the comparison group on 5 out of 10 areas.* At the roundtable there was discussion regarding communication between departments.

G. Infanti said he has not had any problem with the Planning Department, per se, because there is always an open door to talk and they are very receptive to ideas. The problem seems to be with the volunteer boards and their interaction with each other. He referenced one of his projects where he had to go from the Planning Board to the ZBA, back to the Planning Board and to the Conservation Commission. In Milford you have one year to do the work and then a six month extension or else it expires and you have to go through the whole process again. In Amherst you have four years. The Planning Board has been getting better over the past few months and is more streamlined; however, some of the members look more at what is shown on the plan like landscaping rather than what needs to be done such as will the drainage hold up. M. Ciardelli said we have a good core of people on these boards, but how do we make it easier for these volunteers and how do we get everybody together to make a decision.

D. White said we already have ordinances and building permit regulations. We don't need more people looking at something when it's already on paper. How can we streamline the process so that these people have the authority to give approvals right there? We can recommend to the Selectmen to give more authority to boards and departments to make the approval go faster. B. Parker said that type of recommendation would be huge because a lot goes back to whoever is serving the Board and it goes in cycles. It is frustrating for both the applicants and for the department. D. White added that the people working in the Building and Fire Departments need to remember they're working for the people of the Town of Milford not for what they want or would like to see changed. M. Ciardelli asked how much was town versus state regulated.

R. Ball said one answer to what the Selectmen could do is similar to what is done in Scandinavia. Whenever you have complex arrangements with different groups, different requirements and different laws, they employ an ombudsman; someone who would know who to talk to, where to get it done, how to move the paperwork and how to get the communication across. Another answer is to put more effort into the preparation area to cut down on the number of conflicts. We can add services to get rid of some degree of the pettiness. The town has to provide the knowledge and communication. When you get rid of the threat and add some logic, you will find the process quicker. However, people will object because that will cost and money will be spent in the form of salaries. Discussion on the roles of engineer versus town staff and functions ensued. J. McCormack recounted his frustration surrounding the in-ground sprinkler system at the Reserve; there were too many little obstacles. The process needs to be streamlined. J. McCormack also suggested Bill Parker for the position of ombudsman. B. Parker said our weakness is that currently we don't have a philosophy with other town departments regarding an

overall process. M. Putnam said that should be a recommendation. B. Parker said we have to have communication, accountability and responsibility.

D. White said the water and sewer system needs to be extended to further the town's value. Not everybody feels that the water and sewer department benefits all the users because the users are not just those on town water or sewer. The school district, which is a large piece of our pie, is a user and everybody contributes to the schools. Of course, the people who benefit most are the direct water and sewer users but the water and sewer department needs to be cognizant of the whole town. G. Infanti commented that that the direct users pay more because they are metered. B. Chappell said it boils down to an education process or selling the idea. D. White asked what takes so long to put a water line in, coming from a pump station that Hampshire Hills already paid to put in, to come up Emerson Rd, to feed the Reserve, and then to Rte 13 to the Data Products building. That is a key area in town right next to an important interchange. Town of Milford should be excited to put the water in and promote that. Washington is talking about stimulus money and all you hear about is infrastructure because infrastructure drives business in America. B. Parker said that sort of leads us back to boards and commissions and the lack of cooperation. There appears to be a lack of communication between the town and the water and sewer commission. M. Putnam agreed that communication is very important. D. White said what was lost in that translation is that now there are two entities, but they are both still the Town of Milford. Discussion pertaining to the split off the water/sewer department ensued. There was also a brief discussion referencing the school district and the town working as separate entities.

T. O'Connell said that the technology center was discussed as a weakness at the November roundtable. S. Trombly referenced comments from Hollis Line Machine that our schools tell students to become a computer technician, not a plumber or electrician. The schools should get back to promoting the trades, farming and teaching entrepreneurial skills; teach the students in our school system to start their own business and stay in town. We need more skilled labor. G. Infanti said we may have missed something here without representation from the schools. It would be good to fill one seat on this committee with a representative from the technology department or from the school district that could hear this conversation, that the businesses who pay the taxes to keep the schools going are not getting support from those schools. A representative can then bring these concerns directly back to the Board. A brief discussion followed.

T. O'Connell explained that fifteen years ago when the technology center was put in, there was a different philosophy. Building trades were there, but auto technology was scratched and electronics became communications. We were not looking at the trades back then but we did biotechnology and other courses because of the situation at that time. That philosophy has changed over time and agreed that we really should have representation on this committee.

R. Ball said he is currently involved with the Manchester Technical High School and the Community College trying to put together a manufacturing process education program and the biggest problem they have is with the guidance counselors telling the students they shouldn't pursue work in manufacturing. We had a representative from the high school technical department, Rosie Deloge, at the roundtable and I handed her my business card saying I wanted to talk to your people about summer work and internships for students, but as usual no one ever called. G. Infanti said he will be meeting with the superintendant, Bob Suprenant and offered to invite him. H. Leach said this is the opportunity to enhance the connection between the school and businesses.

T. Sapienza said that ties into another weakness in that young people go off to college and don't come back because there are no opportunities here. There are a lot of talented students that college is not right for and we need to create opportunities for them, create a bridge. G. Infanti referenced County Stores and Milford Paint employees that come directly out of high school. They move up the ladder and do well at their jobs. They won't get rich but enjoy their work. If you could plant the seed at the high school level again and do a mentoring day to let students know there can be a future in retail or manufacturing. That may even spar a college degree in business management, but college doesn't have to be for everybody.

Set next meeting date and agenda:

Wednesday February 11th at 7:30AM Hampshire Hills Americana room

Next agenda topics:

T. Sapienza said we have to attract young people and get them to stay. Maybe at one meeting Tracy could talk about some of the things going on downtown like the new all night diner and the social activities. Everything ties together. B. Chappell said once again that goes back to marketing our town. J. McCormack asked if we could get an update from Northeastern University to see how we stand up compared to other communities. D. White said business breeds business. There is very little work out there right now, but a job gets another job and one business will breed others.

H. Leach brought up internet connections and infrastructure as a weakness. B. Chappell and R. Ball said their businesses had not experienced any issues being on a T1 line. H. Leach said they had problems with an infrastructure switch and with Verizon and now FairPoint going down. It is hard to run a bank with no phone or computer for three hours. Their customers who work from home and smaller businesses have also had those issues and need high speed. Maybe we could have a FairPoint representative speak to this committee.

D. White suggested at the next meeting we hold a roundtable discussion on what incentives the town can create to draw and retain businesses. It has been said previously that legally there are certain things that can and can't be done; however, we can take solid requests to the Board of Selectmen to say here is an incentive that we would like to see implemented that will bring business to town. If the ultimate goal is to draw businesses to town, what can be put in place to encourage and reinforce that?

R. Ball said all employees have to have a place to live and they have to be able to afford that living area based upon what the local salaries will provide. Once that is said, then all the other infrastructure becomes important. No matter what the size of the company, they've got to be able to draw those employees from a reasonable distance; why not from the Town of Milford. That is what Milford can do in the next ten years to enhance its future, to make sure we provide a place where they can live and provide a trough to keep them working here. We are no longer a low cost environment where you line up a group of people and they all do the same thing. How does Milford do it? The answer is growth and development which probably choked most people in the past. Those people will need houses built and someone to provide their services. We need a function to produce growth that will attract or keep people working at a higher level of employment and intelligence. That will in turn support the arts, the schools and everything else.

T. Sapienza asked for volunteers to pick a town to investigate what they are doing and bring back the information to share with this committee. B. Chappell said he has already done some investigation and will summarize his findings for the committee.

B. Parker will group today's comments into areas of concern and will try to come up with some suggestions for the group as to what can be done to take care of these issues.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:15AM.

Questions asked:

- Does the Town really want growth?
- Does the town still feel negative about housing?
- What do we need to do keep businesses already here so they can maintain and grow their business in Milford?
- Are there things we could improve?
- What is affordable housing?
- What carrots can businesses give to other businesses?
- How aggressive can we be to make ourselves unique?
- What does the Board of Selectmen have to do to increase the tax base and offset taxes to the residents down the road?
- How do we make it easier for these volunteers and how do we get everybody together to make a decision?
- How can we streamline the process so that these people have the authority to give approvals right there?

Actions items:

- B. Chappell to summarize information collected
- B. Parker to summarize and group today's ideas
- B. Parker to get feedback from Northeastern University program
- TIF minutes of the LandQuest proposal
- Invite a representative from FairPoint to speak
- Website development
- BOS directive to town departments
- Staff to provide package with aerials and maps of identified properties
- Schedule site visits
- Provide updated information from Northeastern University partnership
- Invite Don Zizzi, Northeastern University to a future meeting