

Woonsocket Comprehensive Plan, Steering Committee Meeting

February 15, 2022

Attendees

- **HW Team**
 - Jeff Davis
 - Nate Kelly
 - Kellie King
 - Gabby Queenan
- **Kevin Proft:** City Planner
- **Carl Johnson:** Zoning Official
- **Michael Debroisse:** Interim Planning Director (former Superintendent of Engineering)
- **Scott Gibbs:** EDF-RI (EDF = developers and managers of Highland Park)
- **John Hoyceanyls:** CVS Health, VP of property
- **David Soucy:** City Council Representative
- **Meg Rego:** NWBRV NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley (CDC). CDC focuses on affordable housing and other activities (small kitchen start-up, after-school programs, etc.)
- **Brad Fesmire:** Artistic Director at Riverzedge Arts (arts/design focused youth-serving organization)
- **Jon Pratt:** Planning Board & City Engineer
- **Peter Coffin:** Blackstone River Coalition Coordinator & ThunderMist Task Force for stormwater improvements in City. Former park ranger with Heritage Corridor.
- **Veronicka Vega:** Woonsocket Building Department
- **Adam Remick:** Woonsocket Police Department
- **Paulette Hamilton:** Downtown Woonsocket Collaborative
- **Wendall W. Gardner:** Planning Board
- **Carolyn McCarthy Kyle:** LandMark Medical
- **Steve Crisafulli:** Activitas

Notes

Introduction

- [Kevin Proft]: I want to make sure we recognize some of the new attendees who are joining us here today: Veronicka Vega, Adam Remick, Paulette Hamilton, Wendell Gardner, and Carolyn McCarthy Kyle.

Outreach

- [Jeff Davis] – Thank you to those who have submitted their homework so far. We are still accepting submissions so turn that in whenever you can.
- [Jeff] – We want to spend some time today discussing strategies for reaching traditionally underrepresented people (in the Steering Committee, taking surveys, attending workshops etc.). One of the things that the homework asked for was ideas for new members of the Steering Committee. We noted that the first meeting was mostly white men and we want to make sure

we are also representing women, youth, and people of color in the Committee. If you have recommendations, send them to Kevin who will run them by the Mayor's office.

- [Kevin] – I spoke with Mayor today and she was supportive of adding more members to the Committee to round out diversity.
- [Jeff] – One of the things that we talked about last meeting was language barriers. Unfortunately, no one on city staff can serve as a translator. We are working to get some volunteers for translation for meetings. Right now we have a Spanish version of the flyer and a shadow website in Spanish. We are also exploring with the City ways to reach out to the Laotian community and African community, particularly those who speak Wolof as that appears to be one of the more common languages in the area. Do people have other ideas for ways to reach out to traditionally underrepresented populations in the City?
 - [Paulette Hamilton] – What are the major populations that we would be reaching out to? Spanish, Laotian, etc.? Maybe we should have four or five to focus on and try to get the right materials for them?
 - [Jeff] – So far, the populations we think are missing are Spanish, Laotian, African-American, lower income, and youth (ideally high school students). But we also welcome other thoughts on groups we should particularly try to include. We heard from a representative from HEZ that they are already doing some great work reaching out to these populations (e.g., Head Start with youth and parents, housing authority properties). We are hoping other folks on the Steering Committee can also help us to bridge these connections with different communities.
- [Jeff] – In terms of key outreach points from last week's homework, we heard a lot of new suggestions for places to share messaging about the comprehensive plan to try and engage different groups. If anyone on the Steering Committee has personal or professional connections with these locations or particular groups, please feel free to share flyers and other info with them.
 - [Kevin] – To clarify, last meeting there was some confusion about when to start sharing materials. At this point, everything is live, so please do share the survey and materials with your organizations, personal and professional connections, and social media/ mailing lists you may have.
 - [Paulette] – Do you have the Woonsocket Patch on the list of media people?
 - [Jeff] – Need to double check that one, but we will add it to the list if not.
- [Wendall W. Gardner] – You had said you were looking for a bilingual resident to jump on the Steering Committee, right?
 - [Jeff] – Yes, we are hoping to include someone from the Spanish speaking community in particular.
 - [Wendall] – What about youth? You mentioned high schoolers. Is that for the Steering Committee or just in terms of general outreach to the high school.
 - [Jeff] – Both potentially.
 - [Wendall] – I might have a father and son who could be interested. They are both Spanish speakers and long-standing members of community. Maybe the mother as well (she is on the PTO for the high school)?
 - [Jeff] – That would be fantastic. Any names that you do have for folks who would be interested, please do send their information along to Kevin.

- [Scott Gibbs] – I’m not sure if anyone has reached out to the Northern RI Chamber of Commerce? We might want to reach out to Woonsocket companies through that source?
 - [David Soucy] – I concur, they could be a great resource.
 - [Kevin] – Do you have a suggested contact there? Their director changed and they have been difficult to reach since then.
 - [Scott] – Yes, I will reach out and connect Kevin to the head of the chamber via email introduction.

“Messaging” the Plan

- [Jeff] – As we receive homework feedback, I just want to note that between Kevin and myself, we are working to answer the new proposed FAQ’s and we will get those up on the website.
- [Jeff] – In terms of messaging for the plan, we would like to get a sense from the group if this language is appropriate. Are there other ways to get people excited and interested in this process? What kind of language will make people care?
 - [Paulette] – Most people do not know what the comprehensive plan is. I think we will get a lot of questions about how long this process takes and if people will actually see some of the things in the plan take place in their lifetime. We should have a brief description about how you can be a part of what happens in Woonsocket in the near future. People need to understand why they should be involved and what difference that could make with the plan.
 - [Jeff] – Those are all good points. I will note that in the FAQs, we are trying to keep a list going of those things.
 - [Scott] – I see that we reference business development and entrepreneurship in the flyer. In particular, we should highlight the importance of job creation. The importance of quality job opportunities for residents is a big thing.
 - [Paulette] – Agreed, this all boils down to “how does this affect me?”
 - [Scott] – Yes, we should talk about expanding the tax base and controlling tax costs. People are always concerned about costs for their taxes too.
 - [Veronica Vega] – Coming from a younger point of view, I think we want to be emphasizing that the future is about more development in Woonsocket (housing, things to do in the community, etc.). Younger people are looking to get out of Woonsocket because there is a feeling that there is not a lot to do here, so it would be good to point to the fact that there is more coming in the future.
 - [David] – I concur, we want to push the livability issue. We want to showcase why this is becoming an even more attractive place to live, work, and play. We should also emphasize the arts and entertainment. In addition to jobs and good housing, those things will be appealing to younger people too.
- [Jeff] – Thank you, these are all great additions. Please feel free to keep sending specific thoughts to Kevin too.

Scheduling

- [Jeff] – In February and March, we will be doing some informal outreach at public events to promote the survey and the first public workshop. In late March, we will have the first public

workshop. We will also include a virtual option for people who cannot attend in person. Late March will also be the start for “Woonsocket Conversations,” which is a do-it-yourself public workshop at home. In April-June, HW Group will compile all the information from the workshop and online surveys. We will take a look at the existing plan and strategies, and we will piece together where we see things that need to change, things that are reinforced, and also pick out some general policy directions for each of the topics of the plan. We will then come back in June with a second round of workshops and these will be more open house style. We will have two neighborhood focused open houses for people to drop in anytime to get feedback on the policy directions.

- [Jeff] – For the first public workshop, we are looking to do this sometime in March ideally. Our first objective is to educate folks and we will plan to share some of the same background information that we shared at the first Steering Committee meeting. The second objective is really to listen. We want to hear what people see as the needs for the community and how people see the future of Woonsocket. We would like to get a sense from the group of good dates, times, and locations. We discussed with city staff that the Harris Library might be a good idea for this kickoff meeting to get as many people as possible.
 - [Kevin] – In terms of ballparking a time frame, the last two weeks of March might be a good option. I talked to city staff to see when they would be available and I think we were looking at between March 22 and March 31. I can do a poll for the Steering Committee members to see who is available and interested in helping then.
 - [Paulette] – Maybe we could do two public workshops? One for older folks in the later afternoon with food and coffee at the library? I agree that the library is a good place to hold this because there is plenty of parking. Maybe we could do another one right after work? When people get home from work, they might not want to come back out again. Maybe we could shoot for 6 or so? What length of time were you planning for these sessions?
 - [Jeff] – We are trying to do two hours total. The first 30 minutes or so would be an open house with maps and boards set up for folks to provide feedback on some of the major plan topics (housing, transportation, economic development etc.). We would have some polling questions too for folks to answer. At a minimum, we want this to be a child friendly event so we would have some activities for kids to do things like drawing their favorite places in the city. With the remaining 90 minutes, 15 minutes would be an overview presentation and then 60 minutes would be small group discussions. We would go over the three major questions in the online survey (what do people love, what is one thing they want to change, and what is missing). We would then do a report back from those groups and have some closing remarks. We were thinking maybe 5-7 pm or 6-8 pm? At that point, daylight savings will have happened so the sun will not set until after 7, which will hopefully help with people who do not want to stay out too late. We would mirror something online for folks who cannot come in person.
 - [Paulette] – Is 2 hours a long-time commitment for people? Maybe a 1-hour session might be more palatable? Or even an hour and a half?
 - [Jeff] – We are definitely flexible and can adjust the open house and group discussions to be shorter.

- [Kevin] – Maybe we could flip the order of the activities? Maybe start with the more formal discussion and then have the open house section at the end? That might let people leave when they need to while still getting the critical part out of the way first.
- [Jeff] – Yes, we can definitely make that change.
- [Scott] – I agree with the flip. Also, is there an online opportunity for people to submit information that the in-person folks will be addressing too?
- [Jeff] – Yes, the online survey currently covers these same three main questions. One thing that we would add to a new survey is questions regarding the big ideas for each of those topic boards. You can see the survey at woonsocketplanning.com. The main page should take you to the survey.
- [Paulette] – Is the survey anonymous? Is it capturing emails?
- [Jeff] – Yes, the survey is anonymous. But I will note that for future surveys, we do want to include demographic information questions. We would not capture email addresses or names, but we do want basic demographic information so that we know who we are hearing from and we can amend public outreach strategies as needed.
- [Scott] – Is it your intent at the first public session to share any of the information we have received so far from survey results? Or are you keeping that in your back pocket for now?
- [Jeff] – We will be keeping that in our back pocket for now. The main focus of the June meetings will be sharing the results from the surveys, Conversations, and workshops.

Woonsocket Conversations

- [Jeff] – [Introduced Woonsocket Conversations and Open Houses concept for June]
 - [Meg Rego] – Our organization has been working on ways to get input from people. We find that what works well is planning activities at places where people were already planning to go. For example, we are running a summer concert series in June and we usually have about 200 or so people. That might be a nice outdoor venue to do one of our open houses.
 - [Jeff] – Good point. Anytime we can piggyback off something that is already happening, that is what we want to do. In addition, while we do have the budget to do two full-blown events, if we have locations where we can leave boards up to keep gathering input with a skeleton staff to keep an eye on the items, we can do that as well. Also, we are planning to have these as open houses, but some people do like to have presentations too. That would be an option to offer as well.

Open Comments

- [Paulette] – Jeff or Kevin, do we have sport events or sport teams on our list for outreach? This would allow us to get at youthful feedback, reach parents, and go to places where events are already happening.
 - [Kevin] – That was not on our radar, but it is a good idea to add to the toolkit.
- [Wendall] – Is it a good idea to join in on elementary school events that are already going on? My wife is a cochair of the PTO, it might be good for us to stay in contact with that group.

- (Jeff) –Yes. Any events going on or things happening, we want to build more connections and should take advantage of those opportunities. No permission is needed on our end to do this outreach, you can all just go ahead and get out there. Let our team know if you need some materials in another language, if you need hardcopies to pass out, we can make those too. Just let us know how we can assist you.
- [Wendall] – I will keep Kevin in the loop on school events and those three potential bilingual connections too.
- [Jeff] – Any positive Woonsocket happenings in the last month that we want to recognize?
 - [David] – I went to a wonderful concert at Chan’s Chinese Restaurant and Jazz & Blues Music Club. Some of the best things in our city are the music and arts and we should work to keep those going.

Follow-Up

- Kevin – Sending poll to Steering Committee for potential dates in late March for Public Workshop #1.
- Jeff – Restructuring Public Workshop #1 to start with the presentation/discussion groups and then have the gallery.
- Steering Committee members –
 - Submit homework from last month if not completed yet.
 - Email Kevin if you can host one or more Woonsocket Conversations.
 - If you need any particular information or materials to do your outreach, please email Kevin and HW will compile that for you.
 - Wendall – Three bilingual connections (send to Kevin if they are interested); school events and potential PTO connections (will share with Kevin)
 - Scott – Connect Kevin via email with Northern RI Chamber of Commerce