

# Woonsocket Comprehensive Plan, Steering Committee Meeting

April 19, 2022

## Attendees

- HW Team (Jeff Davis, Nate Kelly, Kellie King, Gabby Queenan)
- City
  - Kevin Proft (City Planner)
  - Veronicka Vega (Code Enforcement)
  - Michael Debrousse (Planning Director)
  - Carl Johnson (Acting Zoning Official)
  - David Soucy (City Council)
  - John Pratt (City Engineer/Planning Board)
  - Wendall Gardner (Planning Board)
- Shelly (HEZ)
- Brad Fesmire (riverzedge ARTS)
- Meg Rego (Neighborworks BRV)
- Scott Gibbs (EDF-RI)

## Notes

### Introduction

Jeff welcomed all Steering Committee members and had everyone reintroduce themselves. Shelly (HEZ) is a new participant on the Steering Committee. Shelly may be a temporary representative until a permanent representative is identified or may stay on as the HEZ's permanent representative.

### Public Workshop #1 Recap

Jeff provided a summary of the first public workshop. **Kevin included a copy of the workshop feedback summary in his 4/18 email to the Steering Committee.** Approximately 30 people, including City staff, attended the workshop. Workshop participants were asked three questions about Woonsocket: (1) What do you love? (2) What do you want to change? (3) What is something you want but is currently missing? Jeff provided a summary of frequently heard responses:

#### Q1: What do you love about Woonsocket?

- Woonsocket's people are generous, kind, helpful, caring, and come together during difficult times.
- The Blackstone River (and other major rivers). These hold lots of opportunities for walking paths and other recreational activities.
- Parks & Recreation programming (e.g., Autumnfest and arts/cultural events)

**Q2: What do you want to change about Woonsocket AND Q3: What is something you want but is currently missing?**

- Related to Economic Development and Marketing:
  - Woonsocket needs regional draws to encourage people to come and stay in City. For example, one person wanted a zoo.
  - Increase economic variety of local businesses.
  - People also wanted a thriving Main Street that serves residents and visitors. Main Street should be the heart of the community. It has some good anchors on either end, but energy/activity should be linked from one end to the other.
- Related to Housing:
  - There were interesting perspectives here. One group of people thought there is too much subsidized housing in the City that creates a “drag.” Another group of people believe there is a need for more affordable housing to meet local needs. This may be a contentious topic at future discussions.
- Related to Circulation:
  - People want to finish and connect bike paths, especially the Blackstone River Bike Path.
  - People are generally more interested in off-street bike paths for recreation versus on-street bike amenities for daily commuting.
  - Participants mentioned opening a Commuter Rail line in the City.
  - Participants also talked about general road safety and traffic improvements.
- Related to Services & Facilities:
  - Need to improve schools—better schools can be a draw to attract families.
  - Address odors from the Sewer Treatment Plant.
- Related Social Services & Public Health/ Food Access:
  - Food access was most commonly mentioned here. People want more healthy options throughout the community, full-service grocery stores, expanded farmers markets, and expanded food assistance programs.
  - Homelessness was the next most mentioned issue. Participants discussed adding more warming/cooling places and wraparound services for individuals who are unhoused.
- Related to Natural Resources:
  - This topic was not addressed very specifically. Participants did mention wanting to improve the health and water quality of water bodies in the City.
- Related to Historic & Cultural Resources/Tourism:
  - Participants were interested in having more art galleries, shows, and pop-up exhibits.
  - Participants mentioned that Woonsocket has a lot of resources, but there isn’t a lot of support at the state level to promote local tourism opportunities.
- Related to Parks & Recreation:
  - By far, the most mentioned response was the need to expand recreational programming, specifically for youth. Participants want more opportunities for youth to be active outdoors and participate in after-school programs to keep them engaged.
- Related to Land Use:

- This topic was not addressed very specifically. Participants did mention wanting to reuse vacant buildings and believed that the City should make it easier to reuse vacant spaces for productive purposes.
- Other Uncategorized Comments:
  - A number of people expressed that politics get in the way of progress and that there is a lot of political grandstanding. People supported more data-based policymaking.
  - Participants want to improve the public’s perception of Woonsocket and make people have more respect for the community and its resources.

Jeff also noted that we began the “Getting to Know You” surveys. We want to know demographic characteristics like age, income, gender, etc., to understand who we’re reaching and who we need to reach with the public engagement process. Jeff summarized the “Getting to Know You” survey results from the first public workshop:

- The age of public workshop participants skewed older, but there was still good representation across age groups. East Woonsocket residents dominated, but there was representation of different neighborhoods throughout the City. The crowd identified largely as white and was fairly split between male/female. Reported income levels ranged but skewed to the wealthier side. No participants identified themselves as a veteran or having a disability.

Jeff said that we will continue to ask the workshop questions through May and as we lead up to the June open houses. **The virtual version of the workshop is available online at [www.woonsocketplanning.com](http://www.woonsocketplanning.com).**

Jeff opened the floor for general comments from the Steering Committee:

- Kevin: In terms of the difference of opinion on housing (whether there’s enough or not enough affordable housing), it seems like there’s more comfort with affordable housing being included in a mixed-income housing development or as single-family units in neighborhoods. I.e., getting away from “blocks” of affordable housing and more toward distributing it into and throughout the community. It is often helpful for developers to take advantage of affordable housing tax credits/development subsidies that are offered by including affordable rate units within a larger development complex. That might be something to flag as we think about affordable housing policy and find common ground moving forward.
- Mike: As Director, this was my first time involved in this type of process. Thank you to HW and Kevin for everything! I didn’t know what to expect when I got there, and I felt good after leaving. My group was very good and I spoke with several people after the event officially ended. The participants did an awesome job.
- Kevin: Agreed—it was a good night.

## Outreach

Jeff reiterated that we want to get as many people as possible to visit the website to provide their feedback using the virtual engagement options. The team has been sending out e-blasts, and the Mayor's office has sent out press releases. The engagement effort continues to rely on the Steering Committee to reach out and engage with the public. **Jeff sent updated social media posts to the Steering Committee on 4/19.** If anyone needs a different format, please let the HW Team know.

**Another goal is to have every member of the Steering Committee host at least two Woonsocket Conversations.** The Steering Committee has the packets and materials needed to do so. Brad did a great one at riverzedge ARTS, but that is the only one that has happened so far.

**Jeff asked the Steering Committee what each individual member can commit to doing to help advance the comprehensive plan over the next few weeks.** Again, great work has been done, and it is okay if people hear the same message from multiple Steering Committee members—redundancy is great! Steering Committee members said they can commit to doing the following:

- Meg: Neighborworks BRV will hold a Woonsocket Conversation during its May 5<sup>th</sup> All Staff Meeting. This will reach about 25 people and will use breakout spaces to discuss different topics. The updated social media tools will be easy to share as well.
- Scott: Will contact the Highland Park companies via an e-mail blast after Camoin, the economic development consultant contacts him about the business roundtable discussion (to be held around the same time as the June Open Houses). Will include information about the business roundtable and encourage companies to be engaged in the comprehensive plan process and communicate this opportunity to their employees.
- Wendall: Will reach out to his contacts to try and identify potential groups for Woonsocket Conversations, including his contact in Woonsocket's Spanish-speaking/Hispanic community. Would feel more comfortable collaborating with someone from City or Steering Committee on the actual conversation. Will be in touch with Kevin to coordinate.
- Brad: riverzedge ARTS is going to reach out to parents of its youth participants and hold a parent-specific focus group. Has already held a youth-specific focus group and now wants to hear the parent perspective.
- Dave: Will share social media posts and information via e-blasts. Will talk to the rest of the City Council about ways to contact their constituents. Dave mentioned several additional opportunities the project team could look into:
  - Set up an informal or formal presentation to the City Council to engage them in the process. This would be helpful to plug into their public outreach channels. Jeff and Kevin have discussed previously and are thinking of targeting mid- to late-May to try and present to the Council.
  - Hosting an informal informational session at the Senior Center
  - Hosting an informal informational session at the Rotary Club. Note that the Rotary Club is a mixed group and not only Woonsocket-associated people.
- Shelly: Will reach out to the HEZ Housing Workgroup to see if they would like to have a Woonsocket Conversation, or if there is a different workgroup that would like to. Shelly

reiterated that the HEZ is a collaborative, and the workgroups are comprised of resident voices and member organizations that work in the community. The workgroup will decide whether they want to participate—workgroups are interested in the comprehensive plan process, but still figuring out how they can best be involved.

- Kevin: Will reach out to the HEZ Food Access Workgroup to see if they would like to have a Woonsocket Conversation. Kevin will also coordinate with Mike about publicizing engagement opportunities on the radio. Will also send out a follow-up e-blast about the workshop with instructions on how to engage virtually.
- Mike: Will push information out via the radio. Has and will continue to send information to the Solid Waste Department and publicize information there. Will continue to commit time/staff to the effort as needed.
- Veronica: Will think of how to host an engagement event on Facebook or Instagram Live, since many people interact in that space. A script or an outline might be good to have. Could possibly use polls or direct people to website and virtual surveys. Will reach out for assistance and/or coordination help as needed.

## 2012 Comp Plan: Goals and Policies Discussion

### Audit of Goals and Policies Homework

Jeff started a debrief of the **Audit of Goals and Policies** in the existing comprehensive plan homework. David and Kevin completed their homework already! One of the more tedious tasks we have to do is audit the current comprehensive plan's goals and policies. A similar spreadsheet has already been sent to municipal departments with ALL actions in the current plan. The purpose of the audit is to determine what has been completed, what is in progress, what is still important to pursue, and what is no longer relevant. Except for Shelly, all Steering Committee members have the audit information in their emails. Kevin will send Shelly's email address to the HW Team.

**For the Audit of Goals and Policies, Steering Committee members should go through the spreadsheet and give their initial gut reactions—which goals and policies are good, which need to be changed, and which should be dropped? This was sent as an attachment in Kevin's 4/11 and 4/18 emails.**

**We want to be able to take a close look at the items where there is a lot of disagreement and/or comments especially. This is helpful for the June Open Houses as we start to pull out and develop policies to discuss with the public.**

### Comprehensive Plan Chapter Organization

There are currently eight chapters in the comprehensive plan. Jeff led the Steering Committee through a discussion of how to organize the comprehensive plan, and what changes the team is proposing for the new plan:

**Q1: How to incorporate the existing Heritage Corridor Chapter into the updated plan—keep it separate or integrate it throughout the updated plan?**

- Jeff: Much of this chapter deals with issues that are addressed in other chapters (e.g., transportation, economic development, natural and cultural resources). Rather than split this information out across the chapters, it may be more easily understandable to have a spotlight on the Heritage Corridor in every chapter where relevant. Any thoughts on that approach?
- Meg: Agreed, it makes sense to have that integrated into the other chapters.
- David: Agrees with Meg's opinion.
- Kevin: We want a statement that the City values being part of the Heritage Corridor and recognizes its importance to the historical character of the City. When using the existing comprehensive plan, the Heritage Corridor chapter is very redundant to other chapters in practice. As long as the new plan reflects the City's commitment to being part of this regional historic and cultural resource, it makes sense to streamline the plan and remove it as a separate chapter.
- *The Steering Committee's discussion supported integrating information about the Heritage Corridor throughout the new plan's relevant chapters instead of keeping it as a separate chapter.*

**Q2: How should the Natural & Cultural Resources and Open Space & Recreation Chapters be organized? Additionally, the plan needs to incorporate discussion of Natural Hazards & Climate Change. Where should that be placed in the new plan?**

- Jeff: Another topic that might benefit from shuffling around is the Natural & Cultural Resources chapter. Those topics are grouped together and are separate from the Open Space & Recreation Chapter. However, the Cultural Resources discussion is more about historic and arts resources. What about reformatting so Historic & Cultural Resources is a chapter; Natural Resources, Open Space, Natural Hazards & Climate Change is a chapter; and Parks & Recreation is a chapter? The Parks & Recreation chapter would focus on maintained recreational resources. Does that make sense?
- Kevin: Agrees that the Natural & Cultural Resources Chapter in existing plan should be split up. Thinks that what Jeff is suggesting about grouping Natural Resources with Natural Hazards makes sense. So essentially, that would be Natural Resources, Natural Hazards & Climate Change.
- Shelly: What would Natural Hazards encompass?
- Jeff: Natural Hazards are things like resilience to flooding, increased storms, excessive heat in the summer or excessive cold in the winter. The City does have a Hazard Mitigation Plan—we're not duplicating that but we want to address hazards broadly in the comprehensive plan.
- Shelly: Agrees, that sounds like a really good idea, especially given the context of climate change.
- Kevin: Thinking about it a little more, does the grouping of Natural Resources and Natural Hazards make it seem like natural hazards are exclusively going to affect natural resources? Would it make more sense to separate into (1) Historic & Cultural Resources, (2) Natural Resources & Open Space, and (3) Natural Hazards & Climate Change?
- *The Steering Committee's discussion supported reorganizing the Natural & Cultural Resources and Open Space & Recreation Chapters. The planned organization is now (1) Historic & Cultural Resources, (2) Natural Resources & Open Space, (3) Natural Hazards & Climate Change, and (4) Parks & Recreation. The chapters will not necessarily occur in that order in the final plan.*

**Q2: The State requires that we discuss Energy in the comprehensive plan. Where should that topic go in the new plan?**

- Jeff: Sometimes Energy lives under Services & Facilities, but there are lots of things that can fall under the Energy umbrella. The crux is about energy efficiency, renewable energy in municipal facilities, and efficiencies of the municipal fleet. So, I am inclined to discuss Energy in the context of Services & Facilities, but I am open to other perspectives.
- Scott: The Energy issue is also a foundational issue for Economic Development and Housing. There are opportunities in other comprehensive plan elements to incorporate the energy efficiency and renewable energy discussion into.
- Kevin: Does Energy have to be its own section, or can it be incorporated into other chapters as a “spotlight” type thing (similar to the Heritage Corridor)?
- Jeff: The State does not have a set format—as long as the requirements are addressed, that is good.
- Scott: Then it probably warrants its own section. That would indicate it has greater value than folding it into other chapters as a secondary component.
- *The Steering Committee’s discussion supported pulling Energy out as a separate chapter.*

To end the discussion, Jeff stated that we will end up with more chapters than the existing comprehensive plan, but the overall goal is to make the plan much more concise and readable. It would help us tremendously if all Steering Committee members can go through and review the **Audit of Goals and Policies** homework and provide comments on things you have an opinion on. Send your comments back to Kevin, and HW will compile your feedback. This exercise will help shape the content for the June Open Houses.

### June Open Houses

Jeff said there will be two open houses held in June and asked the Steering Committee where and when we should hold them (especially thinking of whether there are existing events to take advantage of, including those in the East End of the City)?

- Meg: Hold on outdoors during the Levitt AMP Music Series. Opening night is 6/17 and there is another on 6/24. The team could do something during the opening act or intermission. The HEZ has done similar things in the past and had a table for people to approach. Ideally, the team needs to have an incentive to attract people. For example, previous **pop**-up meetings in the park have given people **popsicles** for showing up and providing feedback.
- David: Summerfest is planned for July 8<sup>th</sup>. It’s like a mini Autumnfest, and there will be food trucks and music. Little kids and their families may be more likely to come since it also has rides. The event will be at WWII Park.
  - Kevin agreed that this would be a good opportunity to get a wider swathe of residents across the two June Open Houses. Dave will reach out to the Summerfest organizers about this idea.

Jeff noted that when we do these events at other communities, they are often big, indoor events with different topic-specific easels. Since we're planning on piggybacking off existing events, our task is to come up with effective but concise questions to ask. We have to assume we have five minutes of people's time. The Open Houses will be to get high-level responses immediately and directed people to take the surveys online to solicit more detailed feedback.

Kevin wanted to confirm the purpose of the June Open House events. Do we have a draft outline at this point and are trying to see if it passes the "smell test"? Jeff responded, saying that we want to start loading specific policy questions into the chapters. We won't be asking people to review specific actions at this point. That's why it's important for the Steering Committee to do the Audit of Goals and Policies beforehand—if there is a sticking point, we want to know so we can craft smart questions and really focus on the public's thoughts.

### Open Comments

No open comments were raised.

### Follow-Up

**Steering Committee members should complete the following:**

- Work to complete the outreach actions they identified to help advance the comprehensive plan and raise public awareness/engagement.
- Complete the Audit of Goals and Policies in the existing comprehensive plan and send their comments to Kevin. **This was sent as an attachment in Kevin's 4/11 and 4/18 emails.** Members can provide comments on the goals and policies they are most familiar with or interested in.