

Final Report of the June 20, 2013 Strategic Planning Retreat



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Executive Summary

Our third annual Strategic Planning Retreat was held on June 20, 2013 at Kimball Farm in Westford. We had perfect weather for the event and 101 participants joined us for an evening of information sharing, questions, and constructive input from our residents. According to responses on the pre-registration survey approximately 30% of the participants attended the event for the first time. We also conducted a participant survey which indicated overall satisfaction with the event and provided constructive comments to help improve the retreat next year.



All of the materials distributed in the packet and presented in the meeting are available online at www.westfordma.gov/retreat.



Westford Cable Access Television (WCAT) produced an excellent video documenting the 2013 Strategic Planning Retreat. WCAT added text to the screen to help the viewers

understand the questions that were asked. Here is the link to view the video:

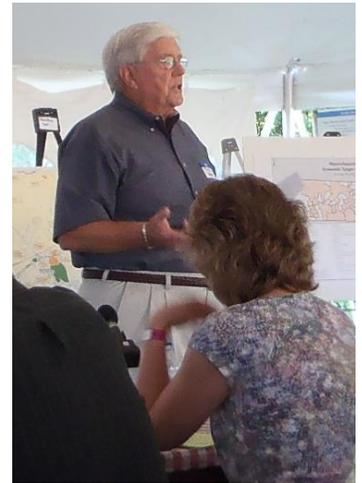
<http://westfordcat.pegcentral.com/player.php?video=144580b23df4465c0c26af66737c360e>

In this report you will find key points highlighted for each group discussion followed by a brief summary of the results of the participant surveys.

Summary of Group Discussions:

Economic Development

- Examined the rationale for attracting new businesses and how it relates to the 2009 Master Plan, with a focus on the underlying question of the traffic impacts to the Route 110 area.
- Highlighted Westford's application to be designated as an Economic Target Area (ETA) to be competitive with other surrounding towns in enticing new business and encouraging existing businesses to expand their Westford location. An ETA would also provide resources to help us address environmental issues associated with older industrial properties.
- Discussed helping businesses with alternative transportation for their employees through a Transportation Management Association developed to address transportation issues in the region.
- Discussed current commercial/industrial vacancy rates in Westford in the range of 11 – 17%. Question was asked about specific square footage of space used for business vs. specific square footage of vacant space. This question will require additional research.
- Two suggestions were made asking the EDC to investigate:
 - Research the possibility of the applicability of 43D, Expedited Permitting, in Westford.
 - Investigate the EDC's possible use of Westford's CPA funds for economic development studies.



Education – mandates, budget, and other issues

The following questions and answers are representative of the group's discussion:

What is the impact of mandates?

- Special Education mandates are the most costly. Others are not so crushing, but are time-consuming and have some financial impact. Administrators and others devote



time to addressing mandated items, making it difficult to address other responsibilities.

What are the guidelines for special education services? How do we know when we have complied?

- WPS is responsible for ages 3 to 22. We are now developing programs for 18-22 year olds to hopefully avoid out-placements for this age group. We try to provide in-district services for all age groups as much as possible. We must diagnose and determine whether services are warranted, and make sure the child qualifies in accordance with the legislation. Parent can accept or decline the recommended services in the IEP. If declined, then it goes to the state board for review. This is a complex and time-consuming process. Circuit Breaker program provides some relief, but the district still assumes a large percentage of the total cost of services.

What has been done to address concerns about illegal drug use since the last Strategic Planning Retreat?

- We added a School Resource Officer at WA. We are using the canine unit more frequently. Incidents on school property have decreased. Chief McEnaney stated that incidents are still occurring, just not as much on school property.

How will we strengthen our guidance efforts to deal with increasing societal mental health issues? How will we address increases in the incidence of autism?

- The School Committee has supported increasing guidance staff, psychologists, behavioral specialists in recent years. WPS is paying for part of the cost of the Town's participation in Project Interface, a referral program for mental health issues. This goes beyond bullying, and is one of the major concerns of the WPS administrators.

What is the current thinking on full-day kindergarten?

- The Superintendent feels it is important, but recognizes that research has focused on urban school districts, and that some research shows that gains dissipate after grade 3. He feels strongly that if we are to offer it, it should not be fee-based, due to inequities that it may cause. The Space Capacity Study Group is looking at how we are utilizing the available spaces in the schools. It appears that right now only Nabnasset would have a space problem, and that we would probably re-district. This would be possible currently because primary enrollment is decreasing. The study group has also been asked to consider whether there is evidence to support a school closure. Birth rates are down, but in-migrations are high. Enrollment peaked in 1999, and we are still within 40 students of that number. A report is expected in the fall.

Is there any state funding to support full-day kindergarten?

- Yes - there would be additional Ch. 70 money allocated to Westford based on full time vs. half-day kindergarten students.

Town Financial Topics - Capital Planning, Other Post-Employment Benefits, Retirement Assessment, and Bond Rating

- There was a discussion about the percent of the town's operating budget that is used for capital. It is currently approximately 1% of the budget used for capital not including borrowing. Other communities set aside as much as 10% but they may have a different definition of capital. What is the appropriate percentage for Westford?
- The group discussed the challenges associated with the unfunded liabilities of \$41 mil in pensions and \$72 mil in OPEB. There was a request to have the OPEB information posted online for residents to review. We provided clarification about the current number of retirees (158 not including school teachers).
- There were questions about the employee health insurance and whether joining the Group Insurance Commission (GIC) would generate savings for the town. It was explained that many towns achieved significant savings from switching to the GIC but Westford has already achieved a similar value as our employee contribution rate is 35/65%, while most in the GIC at 25/75% or higher.



Emergency Planning/Response, Public Safety, and Town/ School Building Safety and Security

- Members of the group expressed disappointment that there was more information about emergencies on Facebook than on the website.
- The group asked why the power lines were not installed underground, and what the town was doing to prune trees near power lines. The Highway Superintendent explained that the underground utilities are cost prohibitive and tree pruning is currently underway by National Grid.
- A resident said she was able to walk right into school and suggested that there should be more training for school staff. The Superintendent addressed the procedure that the schools are supposed to follow for visitors.



- There were concerns raised about the safety of students during elections when schools are used as polling places. The Superintendent explained that they make arrangements to keep voting areas separate from the student population.
- There were questions about train derailments, and how to evacuate? The Police Chief explained that there are evacuation routes established, what it means to shelter in place, and the Fire Chief explained how the Fire District 6 Hazmat team helps in these situations.

Sample of Participant Comments from Survey

“Consider slightly longer sessions and Q&A mixed with activities to generate ideas”

“Very worthwhile, good communication of valuable information.”

“Budget topics with more time to explore ideas”

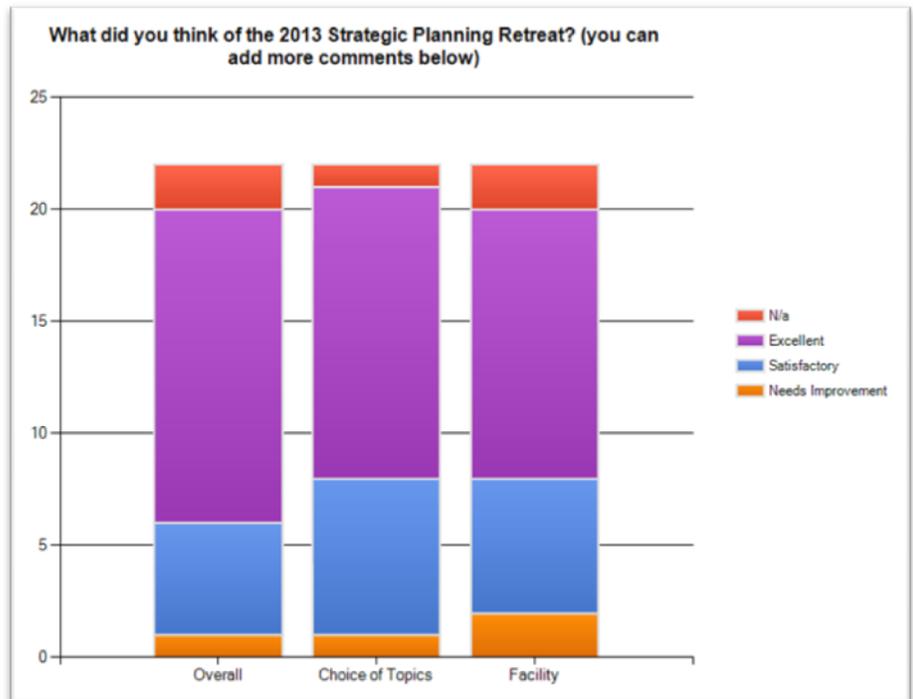
“Great display of cross-dept collaboration for the public.”

“How can we raise awareness and get more residents to participate in these retreats and Town Meeting? “

“Business folks should be invited, not just citizens.”

“Additional time for topics would be helpful.”

“Tough to hear speakers without a PA system. “



2013 Strategic Planning Retreat Participants

(Names and affiliations as they were entered on sign-sheets)

Don Costley, resident
 Amy Coull, resident
 Chris Coutu, GIS Dept
 Joyce Crane, Eagle Reporter
 Stephen Cronin, Water Dept
 Judy Crowley, Planning Board
 Patrick Crowley, resident/worker
 John Cunningham, PWIC/ConCom/CPC
 Gianna D'Alessandro, resident
 Bobbie D'Alessandro, resident
 Eli Demetri, EDC
 Buffie Diercks, Library Trustee
 Jeremy Downs, Engineering Dept
 Patty Dubey, Town Hall
 Dave Earl, ZBA
 Stephen Edwards, WestfordCat
 Kris Erickson, Recycling Committee
 Eric Fahle, ConsCom
 Alice Ferro, Town Accountant
 Susan Flint, Library Trustee
 Marilyn Frank, ConsCom/CPA
 Bill Ftffel, Finance Committee
 Dennis Galvin, Planning Board
 Aime Gervais, Resident
 Dave Greenwood, Fire Dept
 David Gutrod, Historical Committee
 Matt Hakala, Building Commissioner
 Hildred Harhen, resident
 Bill Harman, TPSC
 Scott Hazelton, Selectman
 Ken Hyle, resident
 Sandy Johnston, Museum Board
 Bill Kenison, Engineering Dept
 Chris Kluchman, DLUM
 Erika Kohl, School Committee
 Mark Kost, FinCom
 Lenore Kost, resident
 Lori Krohner, resident
 Penny Lacroix, Historical Museum & resident
 Jim Lamy, resident
 Adrian Leighton, resident
 Hugh Maguire, Water Commissioner

John Mangiaratti, Assistant Town Manager
 Tom McEnaney, Police Dept
 Lorraine McEnaney, resident
 Cailin McEnaney, resident
 Georjann McGaha, resident
 Robert Michael, resident
 Jeff Morrisette, Town Planner
 Marge Murray, School Committee
 Dan O'Donnell, Budget Director
 Bill Olsen, School Superintendent
 Mariclare O'Neal, resident
 Titus Palmer, Board of Assessors & Water Commissioner
 Andrea Peraner- Sweet, Selectman
 Alice Phalen, resident
 Robert Price, Library Trustee
 Mike Princi, Finance Committee
 Rich Rochon, Fire Chief
 Paul Rohs, resident
 Kelly Ross, Selectman
 Jodi Ross, Town Manager
 Terry Ryan, School Committee
 Nancy Schiavone, resident
 Joanne Sheehan, COA
 Don Siriani, resident
 Tom Spuhler, resident
 Terry Stader, Veterans Services
 Robert Stafford, Historical Committee
 Charles Stark, Recycling Committee
 Paul Starratt, Town Engineer
 Colin Strutt, resident
 Christina Strutt, resident/WENV/Westford Connects
 Jim Sullivan, Selectman
 Andrew Sylvia, Westford Patch
 Joe Targ, Firefighter/EMT
 Leslie Thomas, Water Commissioner
 Newell Tillman, resident
 Drew Vernalia, Affordable Housing
 Pertti Vulli, EDC
 Jonnie Walker-Rohs, resident
 Diane Wood, resident
 Val Wormell, Selectman
 Dennis Wrona, Finance Committee

