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MEETING DATE: July 9, 2008

ISSUE DATE: July 30, 2008

REFERENCE: Master Plan Public Forum
West Springfield, Massachusetts
BTI Project No. 1292.01

PRESENT: Ed Sullivan, Chair, Master Plan Committee
Diane Crowell, Master Plan Committee
William Whitney, Master Plan Committee
Chris Nekitopoulos, Master Plan Committee
Katie Harrington, Master Plan Committee
Suzanne Schneider, Master Plan Committee
Cindy Romaniak, Master Plan Committee
Mr. Richard Werbiskis, West Springfield Planning Director
Ms. Tracy Adamski, Tighe & Bond
Ms. Nicole Bourassa, Beals and Thomas
Ms. Mary McCrann, Beals and Thomas
Ms. Kristen Wilson, Beals and Thomas
Approximately 100 Residents of West Springfield

PREPARED BY: Mary McCrann, Beals and Thomas

COPIES TO: K. Wilson, T. Adamski, M. McCrann, Job File, R. Werbiskis, Master Plan Committee

PURPOSE: the purpose of the public forum was to educate community members about the Town of West Springfield's current Master Plan update and the status of the planning process, as well as to facilitate a discussion about the issues relating to transportation, land use, housing, economic development, public facilities, open space, cultural and natural resources as well as the community's goals and objectives.

INTRODUCTION:

When Master Plan public forum participants arrived for the meeting, they were asked to sign in with their name, address, phone number and precinct. They were also asked to note on a map of the community what they liked/disliked about West Springfield and/or what they thought was good/bad about their town. After completing this task, they were asked to enter the auditorium where the rest of the public forum agenda was to proceed.

Mr. Ed Sullivan, the Master Plan Committee Chair, provided a brief introduction and summary of the recent efforts and progress made by the Master Plan Committee. He also introduced the

consultant team of Tighe & Bond and Beals and Thomas. Mr. Sullivan outlined the agenda for the evening and then Ms. Wilson introduced Ms. Bourassa who proceeded to present a slide show which covered some demographic information and the basic concept of a Master Plan, the reasons for preparing a Master Plan, and a variety of West Springfield's demographic information. Ms. Bourassa turned the presentation over to Ms. Wilson who noted several additional statistics about the community and she then asked Ms. Adamski to make a short presentation about some controversial questions that the participants should be thinking about during the session. Ms. Adamski divided the room into break out groups where each one would discuss a different Master Plan element (Land Use, Housing, Economic Development, Public Facilities, Open Space/Historic/Cultural Resources and Transportation. Each group met for about 40 minutes and then a representative for each made a brief presentation to the larger audience explaining what their topic was and what they discussed. This exercise was facilitated by Ms. Adamski.

At the end of the event, Ms. Bourassa summarized what residents noted on the maps before they entered into the auditorium in terms of what they like/dislike about the community and what they thought to be good and bad. Ms. Adamski, Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Werbiskis all thanked everyone for attending and directed them to the Town website to stay up to date on the Master Plan progress.

NOTES FROM VARIOUS BREAK OUT GROUPS:

Below is a *summary* of the notes that were taken during each break out group discussion. The groups were public facilities, transportation, land use, economic development, housing and open space/natural/historic resources. All original notes have been attached to this document.

PUBLIC FACILITIES

- The water pressure in certain areas of town is not good. If more homes are construction there is concern that this issue will worsen.
- There was concern raised about the quality of the drinking water in certain areas.
- There was concern raised about the condition of the infrastructure both for water and general street infrastructure. Road conditions are less than favorable and paving operations need to improve. Side street near Prince Street needs work as does the section of Memorial Avenue from the rotary to Union Street.
- Paving work is also needed by McDonalds and more sidewalks are needed.
- Concern was noted that the subdivision regulations require sidewalks for new projects, however they typically don't connect to anything else and are often left as dead ends.
- Participants liked the idea of leaving the library in the center of town.
- The local high school is in poor condition which is especially obvious since the current middle school is in great condition. Other local schools also need attention. The high school has only received band aids to date and the community really needs to take a hard look at what to do about it. There are potential safety issues with the building as well.

- Offering more electives at the middle school was suggested.
- It was suggested that maybe adding another library branch in town could be a solution instead of moving it entirely.
- Participants believed that instituting a “pay as you throw” program would encourage illegal dumping in town. Opening a public trash facility was suggested.
- Some participants were happy with the present state of municipal services.

TRANSPORTATION

- Participants expressed a strong concern for truck traffic and questioned if there was a better route in town that they could use.
- It would be advantageous to stop trucks from traveling throughout the center of town and from using side streets like Dewey.
- The Town should really limit routes that can be used by dump trucks, particularly since many residential streets are in bad condition.
- Speeding is an issue on Route 20. There needs to be better enforcement and a plan to reduce traffic and speeding.
- Existing bus service is great but very limited. The bus routes need to be improved particularly into the neighborhood areas so that they can be better accessed.
- Participants liked the idea of having a West Springfield Transportation Center where you could park, get on a train and go to Springfield or New Haven. Parking in Springfield is an issue, so why not make the transportation center in West Springfield?
- It was noted that there just seems to be a lot of congestion in West Springfield and traffic pattern flows need to be improved.
- Sewer, water, roads really need to be thoroughly evaluated and their improvement planned.
- Other congestion areas include Route 20 near Friendly’s and the Dunkin Donuts near Kings Highway.
- The intersection of Mama Mia, the liquor store, Cumberland Farms and the town common needs to be re-evaluated and improved for safety, speed, pedestrian walkways and crosswalks.
- Participants think the Town of West Springfield should undertake a major planning study on public transportation. How do we improve what we have and what else can be done?
- Should new buildings, particularly in downtown, be required to have underground parking?
- Participants perceived West Springfield to be very walkable and pedestrian friendly.
- Parking downtown is perceived to be a problem.
- Adding bike lanes to major transportation routes should be seriously considered.
- More parking spaces are needed near the Post Office.
- Participants would like to see more mixed use near the theatre area including but not limited to galleries, restaurants, a farmers market, etc. near the Elm Street area.

- More public access along the River is desired. There needs to be a place to go, park, get out and enjoy the natural resource.

LAND USE

- Participants perceive there to be a steady increase in the local population and number of residential properties
- The group questioned why there is a disproportionate relationship between the population increase and housing increase? Larger families "back then"?
- The neighborhoods in West Springfield are perceived to have differing characteristics:
 1. affluent vs. not
 2. older buildings vs. new
 3. multi vs. single family homes
 4. well maintained and manicured vs. not
- The Merrick neighborhood has seen significant improvements and an influx in the Russian population.
- Participants feel that it is important to preserve the "neighborhood feel" in town. There seem to be a lot of car dealerships. The town has seemed to always rely on a good commercial base and one stop shopping areas area needed. It may be time to shy away from chains like Dunkin Donuts and Walgreens. Boutique commerce should be encouraged like local coffee shops, small grocery stores, unique shops and gathering places.
- Participants questioned if Zoning should include design standards.
- There was a discussion about a particular house across from Wendy's that has a structural fire. Participants questioned what local regulations say in terms of how long the structure can remain unimproved, would it be appropriate to permit another 3 or 4 family house, and whether or not owners should be able to return a home to its existing condition after such an event.
- The idea of changing the character of existing neighborhoods through zoning was not well liked. It was specifically noted that mixed uses should not be permitted in residential areas. What uses fit what neighborhoods appropriately?
- People thought that new commercial development should be better enticed by things like relaxed parking requirements and tax incentives. There doesn't appear to be room to expand commercial or residential properties. Vacant properties should be targeted for occupancy and redevelopment.
- West Springfield should be better marketed in coordination with the Chamber of Commerce and small business development should be encouraged.
- A concern was raised about if a "big box" store closes, how do those people find new employment?
- New commercial construction should stop and existing, vacant structures should be reused.
- Quality of life was discussed – it should be prioritized.

- People thought that residential taxes are too high.
- The Big E does not provide enough community recreational opportunities. The group really likes Westfield as a community.
- Consider charging a maintenance fee to enter Mittineague Park. The group seems to think that other towns take better care of their fields and that the focus should be on maintenance, then acquisitions. The summer camp was moved out of the park years ago due to safety and litter issues and the teen center is vacant due to its poor condition. Summer Movie Night and a Skate Park would be great additions to the community.
- The group discussed the Community Preservation Act and felt that open space is very valuable. Bear Hole should NOT be developed and more open space should have been preserved. It is unfortunate that so much has been developed.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Limits should not be put on Economic Development and businesses should be recruited that will pay high wages unlike a Super Wal-Mart but even those types of jobs should not be scoffed at.
- We should consider vacant lands along the Route 91 corridor to increase Industrial and Commercial Businesses. We should also be willing to rezone where necessary.
- As part of this business expansion you could also have recreational areas developed like ball fields and boating with little or no cost to the town. If this is done the town must be committed to the upkeep those areas.
- Potentially fill in the Stop Log by the old bridge that went to Chicopee with clay and make it into a recreational boating area and also strengthen the dike in that area. Additional ball fields might also be developed on the adjacent land.
- West Springfield should develop standards to improve landscaping and or the design of buildings. In the recent past Western Mass Development Corp. was a resource to oversee business development including developing standards for landscaping and design of buildings. We need this type of organization with the authority and presence to keep developers from doing anything they want.
- There should be an Economic Development outreach program. The crossroads of Routes 90 and 91 make the Route 5 area an attractive place for business to occupy. We have many vacant buildings to market but also plenty of land along the I-91 corridor, along the Connecticut River toward Holyoke and in the Merrick Section of town where the railroad is located.
- More retail/offices/restaurants are needed downtown. More foot traffic should be created with a cobblestone street like Faneuil Hall or more like Northampton where West Springfield would be destination for people to come to. Parking was seen as the biggest drawback so a multilevel garage would be a possible solution to that problem. The Library should stay downtown and be expanded which would be possible with the multilevel garage close for people to park their cars.

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- It was perceived that the Big E has a negative effect on economic development. The discussion noted that it is not that people thought it was a negative to economic development but more that the town does not get the return it deserves from the land that the Big E occupies. A popular suggestion was an entertainment taxes of one dollar on every ticket sold for any and all events. It was clear we need to find a way for the Big E to pay its fair share of taxes to the town of West Springfield. This would go a long way to helping the tax rate being paid by the residents of West Springfield.
- There should be more commercial development. Several areas were sighted including the Merrick Section where the CSX Railroad is located, the Route 91 corridor, along the river up to the Holyoke border along Route 5 and off of Interstate Drive a new road has been put in on the border with Holyoke - William Franks Drive. This road presently ends at a cul-de-sac but could easily be extended to the left back into West Springfield and would extend the Industrial Park in that area to run parallel with Interstate Drive. We do not know who owns that land but K&M Electronics built a building up on that land ten years ago but closer to Prospect St on the West Springfield side, this would be expanding that area along the border of Holyoke and going back toward K&M Electronics. There is also a railroad track that runs through that area which could be helpful in that expansion. This would bring continued cooperation between Holyoke and West Springfield building and improving their Industrial Parks.
- There should be more industrial development. In the same possible areas mentioned above. We would be looking for higher than average paying jobs and if possible work with Occupational Schools so young people from this area could walk right into good quality jobs and not have to move out of this area to find god jobs.

HOUSING

- There needs to be a focus on providing elderly housing that is affordable.
- Housing needs to be balanced with those who have lower or limited incomes.
- Housing should be conveniently located where residents can walk to town services, businesses and recreational areas.
- Neighborhoods should be revitalized to reflect their historic nature and not redeveloped into new, large subdivisions.
- Some participants liked the idea of mixed uses.
- Reduce the amount of vehicle trips that residents make.
- Neighborhoods should be more diverse and have a better mix.
- Seems like the zoning code is not well enforced or implemented.
- There needs to be more housing opportunities for young adults.
- Determine where commercial development should go based on ability of neighborhood residents to walk to the businesses.
- Need to better utilize already developed areas through redevelopment, infill and bike access.
- Concern was raised over real estate prices and taxes.

- In-law or accessory apartments should be allowed. The zoning should make it easier to accomplish this.
- Contractors should be encouraged to comply with specific design requirements for projects that will enhance the town's character.
- For housing developments, gathering and open space should be required.

OPEN SPACE, NATURAL and HISTORIC RESOURCES

- There was a discussion in this group about Bear Hole where the opinions were varied. Some thought that the area be opened to upscale housing which would provide a tax revenue booster. The uses of the area as a dumping ground/ATV and dirt bike area was discussed. Safety and security was a noted issue as well.
- Many thought that the area is irreplaceable and needs protection, not development. There was general agreement that the Town needs to better maintain its current parks and open space, including hiking trails and better access to Mittineague Park.
- Town should evaluate what types of fields are needed (baseball, soccer) and particularly consider adding soccer fields to host local tournaments for multiple teams.
- More information is needed to let residents know what recreation and open space exists throughout the town, perhaps outside their own neighborhoods.
- Some said they would be willing to pay a recreational fee if they were assured the money went into a specific maintenance account and not the general fund.
- Other suggestions for open space included: more signs, better lighting, more bike trails, and better use of the town web site and public access TV.

SUMMARY OF WHAT PARTICIPANTS THINK IS GOOD IN THE COMMUNITY/NEEDS IMPROVEMENT:

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

- Condition of the high school
- Truck Traffic, should be reduced/rerouted
- Better upkeep of fields and recreational areas
- More emphasis on historic preservation
- Need more parking downtown
- No more big box retail
- Small pocket parks are needed all over town
- Sidewalk improvement on lower Elm Street
- There seems to be excess residential growth
- Speed limits need to be lowered or better enforced
- Lots seem to be overdeveloped (houses too big for the lots)
- A new library is needed
- Provide bike lanes
- Provide River access

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- Eliminate traffic circles
- Better communication from the School Department
- Lower property taxes
- Roadway improvements and quality
- Expand the historic district from the White Church on Elm to Park and from Elm to Sand Hill and all around the Town Common
- Water quality improvement
- Clean up Bear Hole, enforce no ATVs, eliminate illegal dumping
- More affordable housing for the elderly in a convenient downtown location
- Improve pedestrian safety
- Town needs to do more for their teenagers, particularly at the high school level
- Reduce the Town carbon footprint
- There should be a major investment in local infrastructure

GOOD IN THE COMMUNITY

- Small town feel
- Family roots/history
- Excellent trash collection and snow removal services
- Arts and cultural events on the green
- The fact that Bear Hole isn't developed
- Local cooperation with the disabilities commission
- Fire, police and teachers are all excellent
- The potential for riverfront access
- Tracts of land for wildlife habitat
- Town walkability

These minutes are accepted as accurate and complete unless corrections and/or additions are received within one week of issue.

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BEALS AND THOMAS, INC.