

The Derry Survey Committee met on Monday, September 14, 2015, beginning at 10:00 a.m., in Room 207 of the Derry Municipal Center to continue discussions about a community wide survey. Present were Town Councilor David Fischer; Susan Hickey, ITA/HR/CFO; Elizabeth Robidoux, Planning; Owen Provencher, Matt Cohen and Michael Layon, Chair. Doug Rathburn was unable to attend.

Michael recapped the last meeting at which the Committee identified the five “big bucket” ideas. This meeting will focus on Economic Development. The Committee can develop questions regarding the direction and scope of that topic. For example, what do people want in the context of what people are willing to pay. How does the town allocate money, time and resources? The other bucket ideas can be reviewed at subsequent meetings.

Members discussed focus areas as they related to economic development. It was noted there are not always a lot of people in the downtown area. Susan reported that when she visited with downtown business owners the concerns seemed to be related to the aesthetics of the downtown. The trees are becoming overgrown and interfering with the ability to see business signs from the roadway, especially for those businesses that utilize awnings. The buildings in the downtown look rundown. Matt thought it would be important to ask what economic development means to the survey participant. Is it a user friendly downtown or is it more revenue for the town? Is it the ability to bring Fortune 500 companies to town? If that is what people want, then the town does not need to develop the downtown area.

Mr. Fischer felt it was important to ask if economic development means bringing big business and taxes to town, does that equate to residents wanting to reduce the tax burden. If that is what the residents want then the focus should be on that; or is it that residents want a family friendly downtown? Birch Street/Crystal Ave is not appealing. Derry could have a quaint downtown. He is not sure how the townspeople will respond. Many times people say they want the buildings in the downtown to be fixed, but if there is no incentive for the property owner to do that, how does the town change the aesthetic? The goal might be to have the face of the buildings upgraded to the point where they complement each other. There are too many of certain types of businesses in town.

Matt asked what is the purpose of economic development. How do you get a company like Caterpillar to locate in Derry? Michael said the purpose might be to improve the downtown to create a family friendly area or to increase revenues so that there is more money to spend. Mr. Fischer said he would like to know what people mean by economic development. Matt suggested ranking different types of economic development. For example, residents could rank manufacturing, tourism and family in order of importance.

Michael suggested the purpose of economic development might be to increase the tax base and to upgrade the appearance of the downtown. With regard to the tax base, is it a shift in the tax burden from resident to business or is it to grow the overall tax base? Susan explained there is no separate business tax in Derry; the tax rate is the same for all unless it is Industrial property. As property assessments go up, the tax rate goes down. Owen noted for a property like JJ’s Pizza which is not in good repair, the tax rate would be lower. Matt thought the goal might be to do both: improve the downtown which would result in an increased tax base.

Michael suggested the second purpose of economic development is to revitalize the downtown. Mr. Fischer said he received an email regarding the Town of Littleton, which has again won the award for the Friendliest Small Town. Liz said Littleton had the same issues as Derry. It is an old mill town. A few

years ago the town invested money in infrastructure and rebuilt the main street. The town is a regional draw – it is home to Chutters, the store with the largest candy counter in the world. The downtown is a few blocks long and has a number of small shops. The town does have the river adjacent. The thing that makes Littleton popular is that it has a niche and a draw. Derry needs to find its niche and capitalize on it.

Michael said he has heard from several people that they would like to see certain stores in town. It would be beneficial to find out if residents want shopping opportunities or something else. The task then becomes how to drill that down. Owen liked what was said during the last meeting about “how”. This committee does not need to know how to get something done; it needs to know “what” the residents want done. It might be two separate issues one of which would be where do residents see Derry going. For example, we have seen that A, B or C can happen; which direction do you want the town to go?

Mr. Fischer asked if it was appropriate to create a vision of the downtown. Visions can be ambiguous. The town does not need more ideas. It would be nice to know if the residents want someone who can take the ideas and be aggressive and imaginative and come back to the residents and say here is the vision and this is how we are going to accomplish it. Derry should be a positive, inviting place. Who is going to do these things? Existing staff have jobs to do. Does economic development mean hiring someone full time to promote the community and find out the cost of revitalization? Do people want to spend money to do this? Michael said he liked the idea of a ranking system so that the survey does not generate a lot of handwritten ideas. At this point it appears the purpose of economic development has to do with the tax rate, the appearance and revitalization of the downtown and choices for shops and businesses.

With regard to direction, Michael thought it would be helpful to ask how much the residents are willing to spend. Where should resources be directed? Mr. Fischer stressed there needs to be a definition of revitalization as well. The survey needs to be easy to understand. Matt asked if SurveyMonkey allows a scenario based survey where the questions can change depending on how someone answers other questions.

Liz said the town needs to be able to work within the reality of Derry. The vision may be one thing, but economic development is going to be constrained by the amount of developable land available (there is not a lot) and the lack of exits off the highway. The town does not have an ocean or a river. Most of Derry’s economic development will come from redevelopment opportunities. The town is not starting from scratch and the survey should not lead people to a vision that cannot become reality. Matt asked if the results of the survey show people want more industry can the Town Council rezone property. Liz said they could, but cautioned the town the runs into the long standing issue that residents abutting commercial property object to commercial development. A good example is when the town converted the old fire station to a restaurant. That resulted in many years of legal battle with an abutter. Owen suggested checking in with the Economic Development Committee to see where they are. Matt agreed that would help determine if people want an increased tax base.

Mr. Fischer said there should be something to let people know why the survey is being conducted and what the town will do with the results of the survey. An introduction could explain the town is doing the survey to find out certain information and to whom the results will go. Do the residents want to support with town resources some of the initiatives the residents say they want? Residents may say they support economic development but they don’t want to hire anyone. The town may want to hire

someone with experience who knows what to do with the ideas. Michael agreed it would be beneficial to have an introduction or abstract that explains why there is a survey so that people know why they are taking it and for what it will be used.

The Committee will work on an introduction between now and the next meeting. The members should also work on some sample questions based on today's discussion.

The five big bucket ideas from the last meeting were economic development (taxes, tourism, retail, Derry's Brand); Life style; land conservation; property tax burden, and Community Services. For community services there had been a discussion with regard to ranking the services with relation to resources. The survey may not need to ask about community services because everyone values the services. Members thought that it might be helpful to know if the levels of service were deemed to be sufficient, could some resources be pared back in favor of other services, or should resources be added anywhere? If this is not useful information then it should not be a topic in the survey. Owen noted that we all value the services but there may be opportunities to identify areas where resources could be shifted. People want to feel at home in Derry. Derry is not just a bedroom community. He felt any results relating to community services would be more of a satisfaction rating. Matt added it would be a way to identify the level of intensity if all else is equal.

Outline:

1. Abstract/Introduction – purpose of the survey and purpose of the big buckets.
2. Economic Development – tourism
3. Land use/Conservation
4. Tax burden/budget
5. Life style – schools, recreation, culture
6. Community services
7. Derry's brand – where do we fit in the region, how do we define Derry
8. Demographic poll/respondent profile – district, years in town, rent or own, kids in school system

Mr. Fischer said if the survey asks a question we already know the answer to, there needs to be a reason why the question is being asked. When the survey is rolled out, it needs to be announced at all Board and Committee meetings and he suggested sending a bulk mailing two weeks prior to let people know it is coming and where people can obtain paper copies if they do not have access to a computer. The businesses will need to be approached to see if they are interested in donating a gift card. Michael suggested asking if they would be willing to put up a small sign with perhaps a QR code providing information and a link to the on line survey. Information about the survey should be on the town website and discussed in the local papers.

Action items for the next meeting: create a communication plan. Matt will work on the technical logistics and Owen will work on the marketing. Demographic data will also be important.

The next meeting will be on Monday, September 28, 2015, at 10:00 a.m. in Room 207. The Committee members will in the meantime, work on a draft introduction and questions. At the meeting, the members will pick a topic, list the proposed questions, and narrow the questions down.