

Joint Downtown Work Session
June 4, 2013

NOTE: These are unapproved minutes, subject to amendment and/or approval at the subsequent board meeting.

In Attendance:

Planning Commission (BPC): Anne Bransfield, Linda Stewart, Marty Feldman, Jeff Guevin

Brandon Select Board: Devon Fuller

Town of Brandon: Richard Baker, Tina Wiles, Steve Beck

Downtown Brandon Alliance (DBA): Jeff Stewart, Anne-Marie Roth

DBA Design Committee: Blaine Cliver, Wayne Rausenberger, Max Ferro, Kellie Martin, Robert Black

Brandon Chamber of Commerce: Janet Mondlak

Brandon Area Economic Development (BAEDC): Alyssa Zollman, Bernie Carr

Also in Attendance: Kathy Rausenberger

1. Call to order

Anne Bransfield called the work session meeting to order at 7:00PM and turned the session over to Robert Black. Mr. Black thanked all for attending and advised the intent of the meeting is to bring the various town committees together in an effort to improve communication, coordination and collaboration for the long-term health of Brandon. The process used for discussion “SWOT” would outline the town’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. An organizational diagram has been developed of the various committees and the individuals involved in each group that include the Select Board, Planning Commission, Town of Brandon Staff, Chamber of Commerce, Brandon Area Economic Development, Downtown Brandon Alliance, and the DBA-Design Committee. It is hoped the joint work sessions will continue through the summer to create a vision and the preferred values for Brandon. The DBA has completed a survey of the downtown businesses. It is thought that there would likely be many commonalities with other cohorts in town, should the survey be extended to the public. The question is what kind of town do we want to live in?

2. Question and Answer Session

a) What is “Best” about Brandon? What do we want to hold on to?

Mr. Black requested input on the best things that Brandon has to offer (Strengths): The suggestions included:

- 1) Community – there is a strong sense of community.
- 2) Availability – there are many services that the town has to offer.
- 3) Ambiance – the town has a lot of culture and atmosphere; and a lot of beauty and charm.
- 4) Great location – the area is rich in natural resources. It is very easy to get to and provides for a good destination area with lots to offer people.
- 5) Welcoming – the town is welcoming to visitors and ideas.
- 6) History – the town has a sense of identity “place” and has beautiful architecture.
- 7) The people – the people vary in socio-economic status, political and religious beliefs. The town has a history of debate and there is a value system where people agree to disagree.

- 8) Purity of a Vermont Town – with regard to land development, Brandon has been noted as one of the two towns in Vermont that has maintained the purity of a Vermont town (Bristol being the other one noted).
- 9) Quality of Life – the town offers a different lifestyle from the big cities; children are safer, there are opportunities that do not exist in larger urban areas.

b) What are Brandon’s perceived weaknesses that inhibit our success?

Mr. Black requested input on the weaknesses that are perceived in the town. (Note: the comments here relate to individual’s “perceptions” at the time of this meeting, and the perceptions are not the same for all individuals.) It was suggested:

- 1) Not enough jobs – people need to be able to afford to live in the town. In the past, there were 1000 more jobs in town. Because people now travel for work (estimated 450-550 residents go out of town to work), they spend money in the community where they work. Brandon used to be the destination where people came to work and shop.
- 2) “Bad history” – Since 1993, there has been a bad history of economic development in creating jobs and re-purposing since the economic downturn.
- 3) Making decisions/”pulling the trigger” – there is a weakness in making decisions, or “pulling the trigger” on actions once decisions are made. There is also a weakness in being proactive and creative in developing jobs.
- 4) Perception of Brandon being “lower class” - historically the town had the perception that it was where many lower class workers lived and worked. Prior to when the economic bottom fell out, the town was on its way to attracting well-to-do retired people. It was noted there needs to be more blue-collar jobs created, as there is a large segment of the population that is being left out. This “perception” is not only from outside Brandon, but may also be the perceptions of residents.
- 5) Low high school rating – it was felt the high school has a low rating and would affect families moving into town.
- 6) Thinking “outside the box” – there is a lack of this type of thinking. One of the prior weaknesses noted regarding lower class workers could actually be a strength, as it provides an available pool of workers.
- 7) Mutual naiveté – it is perceived that due to socio-economic problems (Free and Reduced Lunch Program), the education system is poor in Brandon, however, this is not a reflection on learning. The town has not done a good job of showing its good colors.
- 8) Poor communication – there needs to be better communication between groups and to the general population. There is a division of people who want to move forward and those who want to keep things the same.
- 9) Lack of community (at war) – the town lacks community, as it is perceived that there is a political division and people are “at war” between the groups. In trying to get things accomplished, it is easier to say “no” than “yes” to change. It does not matter where one is from, but the attitude that people have about the town.

c) What things threaten Brandon’s future quality of life (internal and external)?

Mr. Black requested input on what people perceive as threats to Brandon. The suggestions included:

- 1) Tough history – there is a history of the town having difficult economic times that will prevent future success. (points out Brandon’s “flaws”)
- 2) Too easy to say “no”
- 3) Fear of change
- 4) Lack of money (both personal and public)

- 5) Segment 6 – there is concern that the Segment 6 project could affect downtown business.
- 6) No Segment 6 - without Segment 6, the town would lose the infrastructure upgrades that will be done in conjunction with the project, and this could negatively affect downtown business.
- 7) Natural disasters
- 8) Continuation of negative media
- 9) Mosquitoes
- 10) Energy – the future energy costs are a threat, particularly in terms of costs for winter climates
- 11) Lack of long-term planning (common vision of a preferred future for Brandon)

d) What opportunities do we have today to shape a preferred future for Brandon?

Mr. Black asked the participants to provide opportunities for shaping Brandon’s future. Some of the suggestions included:

- 1) Segment 6 – project will provide a \$20 million investment in the infrastructure and will improve the downtown to make it a more desirable place to visit and live.
- 2) Aging American population – there are millions of relatively well-to-do American elders looking for a place (like Brandon) to live.
- 3) Quality high speed internet – there is a need for quality internet to attract businesses of the future as more individuals work from home, and attract businesses who can do their work from anywhere.
- 4) Location – the town should become a better community for outreach from the larger communities: Middlebury, Montreal, Boston, Rutland.
- 5) Leverage (schools and access to recreation) – there is good access to natural recreation. Neshobe School has a good reputation and there is affordable real estate available to attract younger families.
- 6) Quality of Brandon water – Brandon has been deemed one of the best towns in Vermont for its water.
- 7) History/Heritage/Tourism – there is a lot of good history and heritage in town. Many families go back generations. There is opportunity to market Brandon as a destination town.

3. Prioritization of Actions for 2013

Mr. Black asked participants to prioritize the suggestions discussed during the first half of the meeting and determine which committees would take responsibility and focus on the actions. It was noted there are currently some perceived dysfunctions and duplication of efforts amongst the committees. The highest priorities determined by the participants were the fear of change, opportunities of the Segment 6 project to improve the downtown, Brandon’s great location, the issue of not enough jobs and the issues with decision-making/long-term planning. In discussing second tier priorities, it was thought that poor communication and a lack of community were two areas to work on.

First Tier Priorities:

- 1) **Fear of change** (All Groups) – this is all about communication. It was noted that the Planning Commission has been hosting public meetings to discuss Form Based Codes and has turned a threat into an opportunity. The Town* and Chamber’s web sites need to be improved.
- 2) **Segment 6** (Select Board/Town Manager/DBA/ Chamber of Commerce/Citizens) - The Chamber would like to be the contact point for communication for Segment 6. The “Brandon Builds” program was started last year and the mitigation of threat to the downtown businesses has started. It was noted that communication to just the Chamber for Segment 6 is perceived as a lack of communication to the other people in town and it was suggested that the same information provided to the local businesses should also

be shared with the local residents. It was noted the Chamber is looking at getting the word out to all users of Route 7, not just Brandon residents, with the goal of advising people that Brandon is open for business and providing communication updates of the project. The Town* is also in the process of developing flow charts for the various projects in town to provide information to the public on the status of all projects.

- 3) **Making Decisions/Long-Term Planning** (Select Board/BPC/Staff/Voters) – It was noted that making decisions and long-term planning are related to a strong Town Plan and a vision of where the town is going. Making decisions has several parts – there are adjudicative decisions (DRB) that are made on requests and there are policy-making decisions. The Select Board, voters, Town Staff and Planning Commission are the groups involved with the policy-making decisions. There is going to be an attempt made to eliminate duplication of efforts. The voters are the decision-makers and the various committees are the information gatherers. Policy and leadership begins with the Select Board and it will be the action of this committee to find the best way to test out policies. It was discussed there is a weakness and threat to the town concerning communication and these groups will be work to improve better communication.
- 4) **Not enough jobs** (Economic Development Director/BAEDC/Chamber of Commerce//BPC) - It was suggested there be concentration on development of smaller businesses in Brandon as it is not felt there will be a return of the larger manufacturers to town. Another subset for developing jobs will be obtaining broadband internet for the area. These actions are part of the job description for the Economic Development Director.
- 5) **Location** (Select Board/BAEDC/BPC/Brandon Economic Development Manager/Chamber of Commerce) - this was seen as an opportunity. The committees want to play up the location and market Brandon as a community to live and work in. It is important to open up communication in this effort and all groups can work together on communicating this concept.

Second Tier Priorities

- 1) **Poor communication** and 2) **Lack of community** (All Groups) – A suggestion was made to use technology to provide daily information to the public through the website and blogs. The Town* could invite people’s input and monitor the responses. It was noted the Planning Commission currently has a blog and this could potentially be used as the model in developing this process.

Mr. Black stated it will be important to determine what needs to be done and when it will be done. There needs to be another forum and further discussion of the actions. It was suggested the identified committees place the action items on their meeting agendas for their upcoming meetings to continue discussion. It will be important to advise the Planning Commission of any proposed changes to assure that the Town Plan is conducive to the suggestions being made.

*Note: “The Town” is typically taken to mean the main authoritative body of the Town Manager/Staff, working under the directions and decisions of the Select Board. Ultimately this term will come to mean the coordinated workings of all commissions and committees working for the future benefit and sustainability of Brandon.

4. Adjournment

The meeting ended at 9:00PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Charlene Bryant
Recording Secretary

