



2008 Master Plan Update

Focus Group Summary

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Bellingham Planning Board

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Introduction

As part of the information gathering phase of the 2008 Master Plan review, four focus group sessions were organized. The purpose of these focus group sessions was to gain insight as to current attitudes and future development of the town from select interest groups within Bellingham. The focus group sessions were with seniors (S), members of the various parent – teacher organizations (PTO), members of the youth sports activities (Y) and business owners and/or developers within Bellingham (B).

The focus group sessions were held during July, August and September of 2009 and were facilitated by members of the Master Plan Task Force. Each focus group was asked the same questions, with the exception of the business focus group which were asked an additional five questions. Each focus group had less than 10 participants for optimal discussion and lasted about an hour.

The comments collected have been organized into themes within each question. The focus group that made the comment is identified in parenthesis. Comments will be used to help the Master Plan Task Force to identify and create goals for the next 10 year Master Plan.

Executive Summary

The following are highlights of the data collected from the focus group sessions:

- Some of the things that the focus groups polled enjoyed about living in Bellingham include the town's location, small town feel and sense of community.
- Although those polled enjoyed the sense of community, they also felt that community pride was missing.
- Both the senior and business focus groups highlighted the lack of sidewalks as an important issue.
- Both the youth sports group and business group identified the lack of image or vision for different areas in town (i.e. downtown, Mechanic Street, Pulaski Boulevard, Hartford Avenue).
- The PTO group had the most number of suggestions for changes in Bellingham (seven comments) and the senior and business groups had the least (one comment each).
- All four groups felt that money and attitude were major barriers to implementing priorities identified.

Question 1: What do you enjoy about living and/or working in Bellingham?

Location

- Location (B)
- Access (B)
- Location: Commuter accessibility, enticing for development (S)
- Convenient location (Y)

Town size and growth

- Small town feel (PTO)
- Controlled growth / a good plan (PTO)
- Not overly developed: Nice mix of residential, commercial (S)
- Right size of town / population (Y)

Community

- Friendly (Y)
- Community feel (Y)
- Community (B)
- Sense of community (PTO)

Businesses

- Close to large and small businesses (PTO)
- Businesses give back to the town (PTO)
- Acceptance of business (B)

Schools and recreation

- Support for school and recreation (Y)
- School scores going up / doing well (Y)
- Potential for recreational facilities (S)

Affordability

- Affordable (PTO)
- Affordable (Y)

Other

- Government cooperation (B)
- Forward thinking (B)
- Tax rate (B)
- Environmental assets (S)
- Volunteerism (Y)

Question 2: What, if anything, is missing in Bellingham?

Community

- Community pride (PTO)
- Self esteem (PTO)
- Lack of participation (PTO)
- Lack of awareness (PTO)
- 1st class feeling (PTO)
- Resource guide of Bellingham (activities, programs, re cares, bus listings, etc.) (S)
- Pride day – community unity (S)
- Community day, a.k.a. pride day (Y)

Services

- Veteran services – needs and housing (S)
- Adult education classes – job retraining / skills (S)
- Nursing / rehab facilities (S)
- Senior housing – separate mentally handicap facilities (S)
- Handicap senior housing – housing on one level – accessibility for 2nd floor of Wrentham Manor and Depot Court (S)
- Medical facilities (S)

Recreation

- Tennis courts / picnic areas (Y)
- Lack of fields – lacrosse / field hockey / football and soccer practice and playing fields (Y)
- Full time recreation department (Y)
- Balance arts / music with sports (Y)

- Bike trails (S)
- Farmer's market – other ongoing events (S)

Traffic and transportation

- Public transportation (S)
- Poor traffic circulation (S)
- Major roadways (B)
- Public transportation (Y)

Money

- Misdirected allocation of funds (Y)
- Tournaments as \$ earners (Y)
- Concerns about the stagnant population and cost of housing and maintaining quality of education (to maintain or increase home values) (S)

Image

- Specific vision for different areas i.e. Mechanic Street, Pulaski Boulevard, Hartford Avenue (B)
- Design review in key areas (B)
- Lack of image / definable downtown (Y)

Infrastructure

- Sewer in North Bellingham (B)
- Sewer systems (Y)

Sidewalks

- Sidewalks (B)
- Sidewalks (S)

Academic

- Lack of academic focus (PTO)
- Lack of post high school expectations (PTO)

Other

- Zoning consistency (B)
- Rte 140 gap from Franklin to light (B)
- White collar business (PTO)

Question 3: What would you change about Bellingham?

Infrastructure and traffic

- Traffic patterns and road damage (Y)
- Water quality and shortage (Y)
- Remove island at Grove and Hartford Ave to enable truck turning (B)
- Increased sewer capacity with local recharge (ground water) (S)

Schools and academic

- Add gifted and talented program (PTO)
- Focus on reward academics (PTO)
- Close Primavera school (PTO)

Taxes

- Raise taxes and spend money on services (PTO)
- Let voters decide on Prop 2 ½ (PTO)

Other

- Make information (i.e. salaries) public (PTO)
- Encourage parental responsibility (PTO)
- Preserve green / open space in developments (Y)

Question 4: What are the most important priorities for the future of Bellingham?

Schools and academics

- Funding for services and academics (PTO)
- Re-districting (PTO)
- Academic focus (PTO)
- Quality of public education (S)
- School system – class size and recruiting talent, i.e. leadership and teachers (Y)

Community facilities and services

- Increase senior center building (S)
- Public safety (police / fire) (S)
- Upgrade services (PTO)
- Police station (Y)

Infrastructure and transportation

- Sidewalks (S)
- Public transportation (S)
- Infrastructure (B)

Jobs

- Jobs – service based (B)
- Business and job creation / \$ (Y)

Other

- Affordable quality housing (S)
- Healthy tax base (B)
- Maintain and improve “town look and feel” (B)

Question 5: What are the major barriers to implementing the priorities that were just mentioned?

Attitude

- Political will (PTO)
- Acceptance of the status quo / frustration with the inertia with the status quo (PTO)
- Lack of political will to change things (PTO)
- Town meeting (B)
- Indifference (B)
- Community support (S)
- Limited capacity from community / volunteers (Y)

Money

- Money (B)
- Money (PTO)
- Money (S)
- Money (Y)

Planning and vision

- Red tape – bureaucracy (B)
- Major decision makers lack of vision (B)
- Establish vision – prioritize (Boards should consider Master Plan with all decisions) (B)
- Long term planning (S)

Political issues

- Term limits (PTO)
- Political redistricting (Norfolk v. Worcester) (PTO)
- Lack of cache with state lawmakers (PTO)
- Unions (PTO)

Other

- Geography (PTO)
- Communication – signage (B)
- Infrastructure from 495 , exit 17B (Y)

Additional questions asked at the business focus group

Question 6: What are the advantages of doing business in Bellingham?

- Tax base
- Location – 495

Question 7: What assistance or support would help your business?

- Lower taxes
- Incentive program
- Expedite process – coordinated decision making checklist across boards
- Public input in infrastructure projects

Question 8: Do you anticipate your business growing in Bellingham?

- Large business
- Green growth

Question 9: What do you think is a good balance between large and small business?

- Balance between commercial, professional and retail
- Location – confine business areas
- Walkable – parkable

Question 10: What are the benefits of having small businesses in Bellingham?

- Diversity
- Keeps \$ in town
- Local clients
- Feeling of community and friendship with residents and business owners

Appendix: Focus Group Meeting Data

<u>Focus Group</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u># of Participants</u>
Seniors	July 16, 2009	9
PTO	July 22, 2009	3
Youth Sports	August 5, 2009	5
Businesses	September 23, 2009	9