

Bristol, VA

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Business Workshop Summary March 24, 2015

A Business Workshop was held in the Kegley Meeting Room at the Bristol Public Library on March 24, 2015. The purpose of the workshop was to give the community's business leaders and managers an opportunity to share concerns, issues, aspirations, and priorities regarding development of the Bristol Comprehensive Plan, as well as be briefed about the planning process. While participants discussed a variety of city-wide issues, the focus of the discussion centered on the city's business climate and workforce. The workshop's discussion was organized around three central questions:

- *What are five issues or concerns facing businesses in Bristol, VA?*
- *What are three specific projects or actions that could strengthen the business climate in Bristol, VA?*
- *What are the primary strengths and assets of owning/operating a business in Bristol, VA?*

The following is a summary of the thoughts, comments, and opinions received in response to these three questions. Some comments were shared with the entire group, while others were recorded privately on worksheets. It is important to note that the items identified in this summary are not recommendations or observations of the consultant, but rather feedback and comments received from those who participated in the workshop.

Top Issues

Participants were asked to write down and then voice five issues or concerns facing business in Bristol, Virginia. This brought forth a variety of responses; however, many responses were interrelated, complementary, or sub-sets of other responses. Accordingly, the responses were grouped into common themes.

City of Bristol's Financial Condition

The City's current financial troubles were cited as the top concern among participants. It was noted that public schools are facing a budget shortfall, and that City resources have been tied up in "The Falls" development. Participants reported that budgetary issues have led to the creation of new taxes or the increase of existing taxes, harming the business climate.

Competition vs. Cooperation with Neighboring Jurisdictions

Bristol's unique geographic position on the border of Virginia and Tennessee (with Downtown Bristol split between two states) as well as its status as an independent city outside of the control of a county were seen as issues. This fragmentation of government within the region can lead to competition between jurisdictions, but participants were also optimistic about opportunities for cooperation and partnership.

Need for Well-Paying Jobs

Business leaders expressed concern over the exodus of industrial jobs and the reliance on lower wage, retail jobs. This relates to the Bristol's struggle with poverty, and a few participants noted that the local school district has a significant proportion of student receiving free or reduced lunches. The recruitment and retainment of well-paying industrial and white collar jobs was cited as a top priority moving forward.

Lack of Downtown Parking

Downtown Bristol was routinely cited as a local jewel and gaining positive momentum. However, finding the appropriate on-street or lot parking continues to be a challenge, according to business owners and operators. The Downtown's split between two cities/two states increases the challenge for developing a coordinated parking strategy.

Deteriorating Infrastructure

Business leaders noted that Bristol's roadways and bridges are deteriorating and in need of repair and replacement. This causes challenges with distribution of goods, access to services, ability of employees to reach places of employment in a timely manner, as well as creating negative impressions to investors.

Top Project or Actions

Workshop participants suggested a wide range of action items to improve Bristol. Specific projects and actions detailed by business leaders are listed below:

Governance & Intergovernmental Cooperation

- Implementing term-limits on local boards and commissions
- Implement revenue sharing with Washington County encompassing the water shed
- Enter into agreements with Washington County to develop commercial and industrial properties
- Hold regular meetings with both Bristols and identify cooperative efforts to grow both cities

Infrastructure

- Address electrical rates
- Improving/preserving Sugar Hollow Park
- Invest more in schools
- Increase the quality of public schools
- Improve water and sewer infrastructure and capacity

Downtown

- Develop a Downtown Parking Initiative to solve the parking problem
- Improve Downtown parking
- Invest in a Downtown parking garage

Business Development, Marketing, & Tourism

- Updating the City's approach to economic development
- Work more closely and cooperatively with small businesses
- Create a long-term plan focused on targeting growing businesses and providing incentives for them to move/expand
- Create an attractive package to present to companies looking to expand business operations

- Invest in marketing the city to attract businesses and new residents (“Move to Bristol” campaign)
- Provide incentives for local students to go to college or vocational school
- Improve tourism efforts
- Coordinate marketing efforts with existing organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce

Primary Strengths & Assets

Lastly, participants were asked to identify Bristol’s major strengths and assets. Specific strengths and assets listed by workshop participants are listed below:

- Sugar Hollow Park
- Downtown Bristol – great environment to live, work, and play and the “window to the city”
- Public library
- Safe
- Regional events such as races at Bristol Motor Speedway and the Rhythm & Roots festival
- Inexpensive, low cost of living (“more bang for your buck”)
- Accessible
- Uniqueness
- You can experience all four seasons
- Welcoming community
- Strategic location – easy to travel to
- Access to nearby TRI airport and I-81
- Natural beauty – lakes, rivers, mountains, parks, etc.