Overview

Interviews with Westfield residents, business owners, city staff, and representatives of social and community organizations took place at the Rinnova Galley in Downtown Westfield from March 4th through March 6th 2009. The interviews revealed a wide range of issues as well as enthusiastic ideas and recommendations.

Concerns about traffic, pedestrian safety, infrastructure and city projects were clearly important to many interviewees. Participants expressed cautious optimism about Westfield State College’s plans for the downtown. There were also enthusiastic ideas on how to re-vitalize the downtown. Interviewees suggested ways to support local businesses, attract new businesses, develop housing for a range of incomes, and create a welcoming, accessible and vibrant downtown.

In sum, Westfield residents are ready and excited to make the necessary changes to improve their downtown. It will be necessary for both local citizens and the government to communicate more effectively with one another. The City needs to highlight the success of projects that have grown out of previous planning initiatives and cultivate the “wow factor” that this current project can produce.

Predominant Themes

Housing

Most interviewees stressed the need for the development of a variety of housing options as the foundation for downtown revitalization. In particular, participants identified that the downtown would benefit from the development of upscale housing and housing types attractive to young professionals.

Disagreement emerged over both the need and placement of additional low-income housing. Some interviewees believed that low-income housing would be detrimental to downtown and would prefer to see more “young professional” and “upscale” housing. Others recognized that additional affordable units in downtown would serve a real social need and help to create a necessary, vibrant mix.

Key Points:

- Downtown buildings should have retail on the first floor and residential on the above floors.
• State building code stymies rehabilitation efforts in the downtown. Rehabilitation or renovation projects that increases a building’s assessed value by more than 30% triggers ADA compliance requirements (elevators, etc). For downtown buildings with low assessed property values, this 30% compliance requirement can be triggered quite easily for even minor renovation projects. For example, a property owner with building with an assessed value of $100,000 would only have to spend $30,000 on renovations to trigger meeting the ADA requirements.

• Plans for additional housing downtown needs to be in coordination with a host of streetscape and infrastructure improvements as well as the development of more parking spaces.

• Desire for gentrification in the downtown and existing neighborhoods, but not too much. Again, interviewees expressed need for a balanced mix.

• Concern that WSC students will further disrupt adjacent downtown neighborhoods.

**Economic and Business Development**

Interviewees would like to see more locally owned businesses, interesting shops and an anchor store to help draw more shoppers downtown. Citizens recognize the need for increased in foot traffic and streetscape improvements to help businesses thrive. There is a strong sense that the BID is helpful to attracting business to the downtown; however, the community would like to hear more about the BID’s specific projects. The business community recognizes that more community support is necessary to put “Westfield First”.

**Key Points:**

• Although most were not in favor of “big box” stores, they very much saw the need for an appropriate anchor store (like a Barnes and Nobles).

• The area malls and big box stores along Route 20 were blamed for taking business out of downtown.

• Newbury’s and other former businesses were repeatedly cited. How to capitalize on Fond memories of the downtown’s past while not wallowing in the past?

• There is a lack of community support for downtown businesses; the focus should be on supporting the many locally owned small businesses that exist.

• Residents should “Think Westfield First” when it comes to their personal shopping.
• Westfield is a relatively affluent community and therefore can afford to support locally owned businesses.

• Businesses need incentives to locate downtown.

• Rents are perceived to be high for downtown storefronts.

• The permitting process is perceived as friendly for businesses outside of downtown, but an obstacle the downtown businesses. Again, this has a lot to do with the perception that the 30% building renovation rule is a city and not a state requirement. Many believed there should be some sort of tax incentives available to existing owners to improve their shops and also to bring in new desirable shops.

• Need for boutiques and interesting shops to help Westfield shoppers stay put and out of town shoppers to come in. Promote and encourage “destination stores.”

• The Downtown contains a few nice restaurants; however more local patronage is needed.

• Need more restaurant variety in terms of cuisine and cost (but do not want “fast food”).

• Local residents, the city and the newspaper need to help and promote small businesses.

• Not enough stores are open early in the morning or on Sundays (“I can’t get a coffee anywhere before I go to work!”).

• The BID is doing great things for the downtown.

• Many people do not know what the BID really does. The BID should engage the press, etc to put the spotlight on its actions as well as to highlight local businesses.

Downtown Buildings

The downtown needs a “face-lift”. The downtown contains some beautiful historic buildings that need façade improvements to restore and enhance them. The downtown also contains some buildings that need to be demolished and new attractive buildings could take their place. Participants stated that too many buildings are suffering from neglect by absentee landlords. In addition, many participants felt that the city could be enforcing codes more strictly.

Key Points:

• Downtown buildings need a face-lift. The look of downtown keeps people away.

• Westfield has got some “good bones”, but some of the buildings need to go.
• The list of registered historic buildings in Westfield needs to be reevaluated.
• Better code-enforcement needed.
• Design standards for the downtown needed to enforce “the look” of the downtown.

**Westfield State College Plans**

Generally, excitement abounds for a greater Westfield State College presence downtown. Interviewees applaud plans to hold classes downtown, develop a college radio station downtown, and move certain WSC offices to the downtown. While the response to the college’s plan for student housing downtown was generally positive, interviewees expressed concern about noise levels and destruction of property if students lived downtown.

**Key Points:**

• Many felt that downtown student housing downtown needs to be developed in accordance with community needs and be integrated with other non-student housing types.

• Apartments should be built and buildings renovated to entice entice graduate students and faculty (not only undergraduates).

• Better transit route needed to adequately connect Westfield State to downtown (frequency, path of route, etc.).

• Downtown infrastructure needs to be updated before students move in en-mass.

• Existing public and private parking will not be able to accommodate a flood of students into downtown.

• A student presence will add life to the streets, but a larger police presence will be needed.

• Much discussion about which needs to come first: college students or downtown businesses and existing downtown residents?

• Westfield State should open its doors more to the community. Classes downtown are great but here needs to be greater communication with WSC and the Westfield community in general.
Traffic and Pedestrian Safety

Traffic was one of the major concerns highlighted during the interview process. In particular, interviewees expressed concern about downtown rush hour congestion, traffic bottle-necking around the bridge and the high speed of cars going through the downtown. Remediation ideas included re-directing traffic and developing and constructing traffic-calming methods to enhance pedestrian safety.

Key Points:

- Traffic moves way too fast through downtown and becomes congested during rush hour.
- Too many trucks moving through the downtown.
- Elm Street is hard to access from side streets.
- The Arnold-Thomas intersection is problematic.
- Downtown is not pedestrian friendly. Crosswalks and signage are not clearly marked, which endangers pedestrians. Snow is not cleared. Need for additional lighting, benches, signage, way finders, information kiosks, etc...
- Neighborhoods directly adjacent to the Elm Street corridor suffer from traffic congestion.
- Rerouting traffic from Elm Street as the city did during the Taste of Westfield was repeatedly brought up as an recommendation to encourage more pedestrians downtown.
- The rotary around the town green is dangerous for drivers and pedestrians.
- Re-designing the “jug handle” at the entrance to the Mass Pike could help alleviate traffic.

Parking

Varied views emerged about the existing downtown parking situation. Many participants believed that not enough parking existed. Some participants believed plenty of parking existed but people were not well-informed about the location of parking lots. All participants recognized the need for additional parking lots if more students and businesses were to be brought into the downtown. In addition all participants agreed that better signage, crosswalks, better lighting, parking lot surfaces, and connections from the lots to the streets were needed.
to encourage more people to come downtown. All future downtown investment done either privately or publicly should be in coordination with sidewalk and infrastructure improvements.

Key Points:

- People need to be aware of the parking that is available
- Need for more, clear signage for parking around downtown.
- Many existing parking lots are poorly lit, which makes people feel unsafe.
- Existing parking will not be enough when WSC students move downtown.
- A multi-level parking structure would be a great asset.
- Elm Street may benefit from diagonal parking.
- Limited parking makes it hard for landlords to rent stores and apartments.

Infrastructure and Transportation

Interviewees strongly believed that the condition of the streets, sidewalks, and infrastructure (sewers and water pipes) must be updated. Some of the sewer and water pipes are very old and have caused problems for some local businesses. This will need to be remedied before the college students move in (“God help us if they all flush at once”). Transportation options need to be further developed, especially to support any increase in downtown residential development.

Key Points:

- The sidewalks and streets are in bad shape, making it dangerous for elderly and physically challenged citizens to walk downtown.
- Sidewalks should be widened to allow for a more pedestrian friendly street.
- Improve connections to adjacent residential neighborhoods.
- The snow never gets properly plowed, which makes it difficult to cross the streets.
- Additional street lights and signage needed.
- Develop bike lanes on street as well as create an above-grade bike trail on the existing downtown rail corridor.
- Fares for PVTA flex service still too high for seniors.
• Both the Westfield River bridge (Great River Bridge project) and the above-grade rail corridor (Columbia Greenway/bikeway) are some of Westfield’s best assets.

• Some applaud the Great River Bridge project, others think is not going to really help alleviate traffic congestion.

• Concern over removal of trees and existing parking spaces on the town green.

• Hope that the town green project will ease traffic congestion.

• An intermodal center, with enhanced public transportation opportunities within Westfield and neighboring communities, is a good thing.

Community Support and Communication

The interview process revealed that Westfield residents, employees, and business owners suffer from a lack of information or, even worse, misinformation on important city projects or community initiatives. Therefore, there is a need to improve communication between the community, visitors, business owners, city officials and the college. In addition, although there seems to be a number of active community leaders and organizations, this support is not always coordinated.

Key Points:

• There needs to be much more transparency between the community, the city officials and Westfield State.

• Better communication, advertising and presentations of proposed and planned projects are vital to increased community support.

• City pride needs to continually be fostered: a campaign for “Westfield First.”

• Develop public art projects.

• Many interviewees cited the farmers market as an example of an on-going event that has started to bring the community together.

• More activities for people of all ages (intergenerational events).

• Highlight and celebrate Westfield’s heritage: historic and ethnic.

• The Westfield Evening News is suffering and needs a comeback.
• Westfield is an affluent community. The business community and city need to find ways to keep that wealth local.

• Lack of information or misinformation on the following Projects:
  
  *Great River Bridge Project*
  *Columbia Greenway Rail to Trail Conversion*
  *Main St./Broad St./Park Square Traffic Improvement (Town Green Project)*
  *Gas Light District*
  *Parking Garage*
  *Inter-modal Center*
  *Traffic Circulation Study*
  *Westfield State College Student Housing Plan and Arts District*

**Towns/Cities mentioned as case studies:**

Northampton MA, Brattleboro VT, Greenfield MA, Claremont CA, Saratoga Springs NY, Bennington VT, Colorado Springs CO, Burlington VT, Simsbury CT, West Hartford CT, Keene NH.