

Wakefield Village Planning Workshop

Thursday, February 26, 2009

Location: Town Council Chamber, 180 High Street, Wakefield, RI, 7:00 – 9:00 p.m.

Vincent Murray, Director of Planning

Nathan Kelly and Doug McLean, Horsley Witten Group, project consultants

Also among those in attendance were members of the Village Planning Project Steering Committee, Economic Development Committee, Planning Board and Town Council.

Workshop Notes:

- The meeting commenced at 7:00 pm, 35 attendees per sign in sheets (copy attached, included staff and the consultants). Director of Planning Vincent Murray provided opening remarks, introductions of the consulting team and members of the Project Steering Committee, and a general overview of the project.
- Following Mr. Murray's remarks the consultants (principally Nathan Kelly) presented a PowerPoint focusing on central Wakefield (a copy of the presentation is being posted on the Town's website).
- The Wakefield village study focuses on the areas of "old" Wakefield that are currently zoned Commercial Downtown (123 parcels comprising approximately 55 acres of land area). Although these areas are the central focus of the village study, the consultants are also looking at the regional context of these areas such as the infrastructure connections the surrounding neighborhoods and the impacts on nearby natural resources and green space features (Saugatucket River, South County Bike Path, etc).
- The consultant's presentation comprised an inventory, issue analysis, discussion of the merits of "village planning" and review of economic development, cultural heritage, natural resource protection, and sustainability within the village context.
- Themes of the presentation included: planning to enhance the historic village context, community character, diversity of housing and affordable housing in proximity to the downtown, the historic diversity and economic development value of the village setting, local sustainability, the efficiency of compact mixed-use villages versus suburban sprawl, the public health benefits of the area's walkable character, green energy issues (carbon footprint, water usage, and best management practices for enhancing water quality of the Saugatucket River and its connections to Upper Point Judith Pond), cultural resources, adaptive reuse of buildings and sites, and infrastructure servicing the vicinity (including recreational resources and "secret" parking facilities).
- The consultants also provided an overview of the Town's comprehensive community plan policies for central Wakefield and zoning regulations for the Commercial Downtown district noting that the basic zoning code for the district appears to fit the vicinity and generally functions well.
- The consultants indicated that an outcome of the study would be to craft a vision statement for Wakefield Village and establish redevelopment goals that reinforce the vision for the area.

Following the consultant's presentation, a general discussion ensued with attending community members. The major topics and themes that emerged from the dialogue included the following:

- Parking to support existing and future commercial uses, here it was noted that the public parking resources along Main Street could be better configured and lit. These parking resources could be more effectively utilized by raising public awareness of availability (i.e. signage improvements). It was also stated that the perception of parking issues in some areas of the downtown clouded the reality of the issue. Suggestions to improve the functionality of parking in the village included: better, more consistent enforcement of parking limits, use of parking meters, and establishing a "parking improvement district" to manage parking and provide a means to generate funds for infrastructure improvements and other promotional programs.
- The condition and availability of safe crosswalks along Main Street was also discussed at some length. Staff noted that Main Street was a Rhode Island State road and that RIDOT recently agreed to replace all of the deteriorated crosswalks in the old Wakefield area. The consultants applauded the "flag safety" program the Town recently initiated as a creative means to enhance pedestrian safety.
- The rich architectural diversity of the area was highlighted, with respondents noting the detail and good condition of many landmark buildings in old Wakefield.
- Some safety issues were raised regarding vehicles that block the sidewalks with as well as parcels that don't provide appropriate separation of pedestrian and automotive traffic. These safety hazards detract from the economic vitality of the area in general.
- The need to feature the Saugatucket River as an amenity for the downtown was a recurring theme. It is important to improve the public's awareness of the recreational amenities the Saugatucket River Walkway and William C. O'Neill Bike Path offer as supporting features to the downtown.
- The consultants and workshop participants spoke of the potential for upper floor residential uses within many downtown buildings as means to provide affordable workforce housing and increase the activity level in the area.
- The SK Chamber of Commerce's "shop local" initiative and "Ladies Night Out" program were applauded. It was mentioned that the local businesses should consider expanded evening hours and marketing to attract summer visitors on a more consistent basis.
- Local businesses should require their employees to park at remote locations to free up public and business parking facilities for customers.
- Buildings that would benefit from rehabilitation included the Verizon building on upper Main Street and the former gas station, now a dry cleaning shop.
- Participants noted that Main Street had shown great resilience in these trying economic times.
- Promoting the historic values of the area was cited as an effective way to market old Wakefield.

- The consultants noted that the Commercial Downtown District effectively has two segments, the historic downtown west of River Street and Columbia Corners, and an area that is more residential in character, east of Columbia Street/Woodruff Avenue. It was noted that the zoning code treats these two areas identically; however it may be important to recognize their differences and seek to reinforce the best qualities of each segment.
- The bike path was viewed as a key infrastructure resource that could be better utilized and capitalized upon by the local business community. The consultants noted that invasive species were establishing themselves along the pathway and a program to remove these plants should be undertaken.
- The seasonal nature of the local economy was raised as a difficult issue for local businesses. The re-opening of Brickley's Ice Cream Shop (March 5, 2009) was seen as foreshadowing the upcoming tourist season.
- The consultants and others mentioned the Main Street seasonal planting program as "inviting" to consumers.
- The workshop participants also discussed the connections and gateways to old Main Street. Here it was noted that better signage about "Historic Wakefield" would assist in getting patrons into the area from Old Tower Hill Road and Dale Carlia Corners. The highway commercial "strip" along Old Tower Hill Road and at Dale Carlia was mentioned as needing improvement from a functional, safety and aesthetic perspective. This first experience of Wakefield was viewed as largely negative from a visitor's perspective. Installation of street trees, consideration of a boulevard type feature to soften the hardscape of the area, and better signage standards were suggested.
- The entryway into Wakefield from the south and west from Post Road to Main Street was viewed as pleasant and positive. Preservation of the historic Larchwood Inn was seen as critical to anchoring the western end of the Main Street business corridor.
- Bike and pedestrian usage of the area was raised by several respondents as a great asset to the community. Improved connections of infrastructure to service these modes of transport were raised as needs for the area. The bike path and alleyways between buildings could be better utilized in this regard. Creating a more extensive bike path system was discussed.
- The need to maintain and improve RIPTA service to the area was stressed. The use of small buses, trolleys loops, and continuation of RIPTA's existing "flex" service were suggested.
- Many of the participants expressed optimism about the economic development future of old Wakefield given its many assets and historic resilience.
- Promoting well designed "affordable housing" proximate to and within downtown Wakefield was suggested. Staff mentioned the "cottage housing" model used extensively in the Pacific Northwest as a possible vehicle to increase residential density in small developments that are compatible with the historic development patterns of Wakefield Village.
- Many cited the importance of the Saugatucket River as the major environmental feature and connection paralleling Main Street. Efforts to provide improved vistas toward the river from Main Street should be encouraged. Incentives to

promote businesses to “face” the River were mentioned. Improving the conditions of the parking lots facing the Saugatucket was also recommended. Water was cited for having a calming effect on people, useful in today’s fast paced society.

- Staff indicated that future and pending infrastructure improvements would help support Wakefield revitalization efforts (future phase of the Saugatucket River Walkway, completion of the Intermodal Parking Lot and Comfort Station at the former “Teeny’s Glass” shop adjacent to All That Matters, crosswalk improvements, and an outdoor classroom at Wakefield Elementary School).
- Considering aspects of the “slow cities” movement in Europe was suggested for improvements to and promotion of Wakefield as a center of the South Kingstown community.
- Participants noted that promoting Wakefield needed to be a cooperative undertaking among all stakeholders. The use of the internet was cited as a low cost and effective resource for promotion.
- Staff and others suggested that efforts going forward needed to be cognizant of, and respectful to, the rich history of central Wakefield.
- Many participants indicated that the public forum was a very positive experience and a good starting point for the Village Planning process for Wakefield.

Staff and the consultants thanked the workshop participants, noting that a second workshop/meeting would be held in the near future focusing on the Peace Dale village. Later in the process, two additional public meetings focusing on recommendations and findings for Wakefield and Peace Dale respectively will be conducted as the project moves forward. The workshop adjourned at 9:00 p.m.