

FAIRFIELD STRATEGIC PLAN OUTREACH DETAILED REPORT

BACKGROUND

Gathering community wide input on Fairfield's current and future issues and opportunities has been the foundation of the development of the *Fairfield One Town One Vision* Strategic Plan. Outreach activities started at the beginning of the planning process and included key stakeholder interviews, workshops, and online tools.

Over 2,000 residents, youths, business owners/managers, property owners, developers, community leaders, Town staff, and members of commissions and boards attended these activities. Applying the social media concept of influencer's to the raw input means that 30% of the community has provided guidance to this process. Guided by the Strategic Plan Committee as well as professional analysis and observation, community outreach will inform all aspects of the Strategic Plan.

PARTICIPATION

The willingness to participate in community outreach activities is evidenced through the high rates of participation throughout online and in person efforts. This included the following meetings and workshops:

- **Stakeholder Interviews.** Throughout the summer and fall of 2018, the consultant conducted in-person and phone interviews and focus group discussions with more than 65 individuals. These confidential conversations provided the opportunity for participants to convey specific and nuanced information concerning the Town.
- **Community Workshop I.** On the evening of November 7, 2018, the Town hosted a community workshop at the Penfield Pavilion. This event was open to everyone in Fairfield and was meant to gather input on issues and opportunities in the Town.
- **Community Workshop II.** On the morning of November 8, 2018, the Town hosted a second community workshop at the Board of Education offices off of Kings Highway.
- **Business Workshop.** On the morning of November 8, 2018, the Town hosted a business workshop at the Penfield Pavilion. Anyone was welcomed to attend, but the meeting was geared toward the business community. Participants engaged in discussion related to the current business climate in the Town and how it can be enhanced or improved.
- **Joint Boards and Commissions Workshop.** On the morning of November 9, 2018, the Town hosted a Joint Boards and Commissions Workshop at the Penfield Pavilion. Various boards and commissions, and Town Department Heads were invited to attend.

- **Student Workshops.** On November 8 and 9, 2018, the Town hosted four separate student workshops with Warde High School, Ludlowe High School, Fairfield University, and Sacred Heart University. Additionally, during the course of work, sessions were held in various elementary and middle schools, facilitated by SPC members.
- **Customized DIY Workshops.** Between November 2018 and January 2019, the SPC conducted 37 workshops across Fairfield in every demographic, from 8yrs old to 80+, from the Beach to Greenfield Hill and from Southport to Stratfield. DIY workshops were facilitated by community members using a standard script and materials that replicated the exercise conducted in the community workshops. These workshops helped to gather more widespread outreach and engagement. The Consultant facilitated and customized DIY workshops achieved widespread participation approximating 350+ participants,
- **Online Questionnaires.** Four separate online questionnaires were made available on the project website for residents, business owners, youths, and university students with detailed and specific questions about the issues, opportunities, weaknesses, and strengths of Fairfield. As of January 25, 2018, nearly 1,000 questionnaire responses have been received.

COMMUNITY IDENTIFIED ISSUES AND ASPIRATIONS

The biggest component of the outreach effort is focused on identifying key common themes prioritized through workshop exercises and participant discussion. The intent is to define the primary topics and significant areas in which to focus further analysis and discussion.

While more than 300 unique issues/topics were identified, they can generally be categorized into the following five key topic areas. Note: the topic areas are not presented in order of importance or magnitude.

- Governance
- Financial Stability
- Economic Development
- Education
- Community Character and Resiliency

The key topic areas are broad categories that umbrella the majority of issues that emerged as top concerns amongst outreach participants. Although the top concerns have been grouped into the key topic areas, many are interrelated and impact each other. None of the key topic areas can operate in a vacuum and must be taken in aggregate and addressed in the *Fairfield One Town One Vision* Strategic Plan.

GOVERNANCE

Town government structure was an oft cited topic discussed throughout in-person and online outreach. Although participants largely believe that the Town is well functioning, several key areas were commonly mentioned as needing improvement including:

- **Establish common vision, mission, and goals.** Outreach participants expressed a desire for the Town to articulate a clear vision, mission, and goals to unify staff, elected and appointed officials, and residents. Key to this ability was to more effectively communicate with Town residents on everything from Town business to Town events. Many participants discussed circumstances when boards and commissions were not on the same page resulting in confusion and prolonged discussion. Several participants mentioned the mission statements developed by certain departments and discussed how those had helped to guide employees and elected officials in decision making and streamline processes. The same participants went on to discuss how the Town as a whole needs a similar, unifying vision statement, mission statement, and goals, to best outline the challenges and community wide actions needed. This was further expressed by some as a need for better Branding of Fairfield. To better communicate concisely, 'what is Fairfield'.
- **Reexamine the Town Charter.** Fairfield's status as a Town and its implications on government efficiencies was widely discussed throughout in-person outreach events. Many participants lamented the fact that Fairfield, despite having a population of more than 60,000, continues to be run as a town instead of a city. Participants mentioned several inefficiencies resulting from Fairfield's status as a town. Of all the government bodies the RTM was specifically highlighted as bloated, inefficient and not effectively representing the people in their district. There was also concern about the excessive number of boards and commissions.
- **Outdated or unnecessary Town services.** Many participants discussed the plethora of services provided by the Town and their associated costs, some expressing frustration and others praising their quality. Participants that discussed the high quality of the services did not necessarily feel as if their quality outweighed the need for increasing tax dollars. Although no consensus was reached on the types of services that should be consolidated or eliminated, participants felt that a deeper analysis was needed to better understand the cost benefits of privatizing select Town services.
- **Opportunities for shared services and multi-community cooperation.** Opportunities to both reduce duplicate functions within the town and work collaboratively with other select communities to reduce costs and increase efficiencies was a key topic that emerged throughout outreach efforts. Participants discussed the positive impacts that shared services could have on the Town by freeing up financial resources, optimizing services, and introducing opportunities for innovation. A three tier structure of cross community, cross town, and cross department structure to evaluate Shared Services began to take shape. Suggestions for multi-community collaboration could include, but not be limited to: transportation specifically dial a ride services for seniors, tax collection, public safety dispatch, apparatus maintenance, and animal control.

- **Upgrade and integrate technology.** The lack of technology at the Town Hall was an issue widely discussed among participants, specifically Town employees and members of boards and commissions. These conversations revolved around the need to bring Town Hall into the 21st century by integrating technology into the day to day functions of government. Ideas discussed included, updating the Town website to be more user friendly, allowing online payment and completion of fees and forms, increasing transparency in the development process by making proposals and plans more readily accessible, and dispelling confusion associated with zoning by making the codes easier to navigate.
- **Better leverage State representation.** A final issue related to governance that emerged throughout outreach efforts revolved around the need for the Town to better leverage State representation to proactively advocate for the interests of the Town. Participants discussed how this type of advocacy should be outside of typical political alignments and work towards avoiding costs to the Town and better investments in State programs of importance to the Town such as road and rail infrastructure or better cost controls to close budget gaps.. A frequently raised topic was the need for adequate road and rail infrastructure maintenance and investment. These are key elements of the Town's attractiveness, yet are beyond the ability of the Town to address, therefore requiring action through State representation.

FINANCIAL STABILITY

Financial stability of the Town was a direct aspect, as well as an undercurrent of most conversations throughout outreach events. While there is broad recognition of Fairfield's ability to maintain a AAA rating in the midst of significant financial turmoil, residents, business owners, elected and appointed officials, as well as staff expressed concern about the impact of the state's finances on the Town including a \$4 to \$5 billion budget deficit. Three topics emerged as key themes including,

- **Impact of loss of tax revenue.** One of the more widely discussed topics throughout in-person outreach was the impact of nontax paying institutions/organizations. Concern was expressed over the loss of GE and the purchase of the property by Sacred Heart University. While this concern was expressed, it is important to note that both Sacred Heart and Fairfield University were cited as positive contributors to the economic vitality and image of the community. Additionally, participants asserted the importance of attracting and retaining new business in order to offset this loss of business and revenue.
- **Declining property values.** There was regular expression of concern regarding declining property values and related impact on Town revenues, Town budgets, and resulting taxes and service fee requirements, impairing fiscal stability. There was a desire expressed for lower budget increases as well as managing Town spending more effectively, including the major cost components of the Town budget. There was also concern regarding the impact on the Town's financial stability and taxes of currently unknown further State cuts or costs pushed to Town.

- **Cost of personnel and benefits.** Participants throughout outreach events, particularly Town officials, discussed the rising and ongoing cost of personnel and benefits including funding long-term pensions. Of particular concern was the inability to eliminate or drastically change the structure. The impact on the ability to continue to provide quality Town services under these constraints was highlighted as a particular concern.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic development and the need to grow the grand list were major issues brought up at every workshop and stakeholder interview. Although participants varied on their approaches to the subject, nearly everyone agreed that in order to keep property taxes at a reasonable rate while maintaining the high level of service the Town currently provides, its necessary to attract and retain commercial retail, office, restaurant, and entertainment uses. Several topics emerged as key themes including:

- **Expand the Office of Community and Economic Development.** A common theme throughout outreach events was the need to proactively recruit and attract new business to locate in Fairfield. Participants thought highly of the work currently being done by the Office of Community and Economic Development but expressed concern that it was mainly focused on retaining existing business, especially business in the Downtown. However, even within this definition existing businesses, some of which are strategic to the town and are trying to expand, expressed frustration that their requirements were not viewed any differently than minor garage additions or selection of shrubbery. Although participants did not reach a consensus on the desired approach to resolve this issue, many participants discussed the need to expand the Office of Community and Economic Development. Ideas for new positions included a Town Ombudsman who would be responsible for guiding potential investors through the development and permitting process, or a Business Attraction Program Manager who would be responsible for networking with potential investors to encourage them to locate in Fairfield.
- **Identify sites for new commercial development.** Discussion throughout outreach events revolved around the need to maintain Fairfield as a predominately residential community, while also encouraging new commercial development in order to grow the Grand List. Participants talked about the need to identify key nodes to create new opportunities for desirable development as well as the need to maintain and enhance the character, appearance, and function of existing commercial areas. Potential areas for new commercial development include, the area surrounding the Fairfield Metro Station, the former Exide Battery Factory site, the Turner Reserve Center, the beach, Commerce Drive, the Knights of Columbus property, and Black Rock Turnpike. Several comments were made regarding methods to provide economic incentives to encourage development and business' locating here, as well as the suggestion to look for both smaller quick opportunities as well as a handful of larger "high impact" situations.

- **Eliminate barriers to development.** Several key stakeholders who took part in the interview process voiced concern over a number of barriers they have faced in developing or redeveloping property in Fairfield. These barriers include inconsistencies between various Town permitting offices and lack of communication with businesses and developers/investors, lack of prioritization of key projects in permit approval processes, and lack of a clear vision and plan for future commercial development and resulting reactant decision making.
- **Local landmark blight.** There was frequent and sometimes emotional discussion around several properties in Landmark locations that have been allowed to languish and decay for years. The properties in particular that were mentioned the most were the Stratified Market and The Community Theater. By design, there was not much dialogue on solutions but the overwhelming sentiment was that this was a failure of the Town government to effectively find a way to manage strategic landlords.

EDUCATION

More than any other topic, Fairfield's public education system was cited as one of the community's greatest strengths. Participants expressed that schools are an essential community asset and are a primary reason why many residents choose to move to Fairfield. Despite an overwhelming consensus on the need to maintain the high standards of the school system, debate arose over the level of funding the Town dedicates to this cause. Several issues emerged throughout the outreach process including,

- **Quality of Education.** In many sessions while participants acknowledged the funding challenges facing the school district they also wrestled with the quality of education offered. Participants concerns ranged across a number of issues but centered mostly on: increasing class size, teacher skills and curriculum turnover. Participants acknowledged the professionalism and dedication of their Teachers and there wasn't discussion to differential between level of experience Vs competence. Curriculum turnover was a contributor to the skills issue since some participants comments indicated everyone was learning new curriculum at the same time.
- **Quality of school facilities.** Participants throughout in-person outreach events expressed concern over the quality of school facilities, specifically the lack of air conditioning in some schools, and necessary safety renovations. In contrast to the discussion surrounding the need to update school facilities, participants also discussed the room for growth within existing buildings due to a recent decline in school attendance. Opinions were divided over the need to close select school facilities due to this decline or whether projected long-term enrollment growth justifies keeping them open.

- **Declining school attendance and rising costs.** In 2017 Fairfield Public Schools published enrollment projections through 2027-28. Current enrollment is approximately 9,800 students. The projections are supported by demographic, housing, and economic data and show an anticipated decline in school enrollment of approximately 4% through 2027-28. The view was expressed that realistic adjustments are needed in light of current trends and circumstances. Participants throughout outreach events were familiar with these projections and discussed the dichotomy between the projections and the budget increases requested by the school system and approved by the Town. Although participants did not express a desire to cut the amount of funding given to the school system, they did express a desire for it to remain stable, and for the need to better manage and economize on non-classroom related cost structure.
- **Lack of diversity throughout the district.** Income, racial, and ethnic diversity at Fairfield Schools were discussed as concerns throughout outreach events. Participants noted that McKinley Elementary School in the southeast portion of the Town, is by far the most diverse school in the system. Parents of McKinley students discussed how the school's diversity benefits their children's education and they are wary of efforts to redistribute students to increase diversity throughout the system. In contrast, students at Warde High School discussed the perceived inequities between their school and Ludlowe High School across Town. The students and other participants felt as though redistricting would help to solve this issue. However, in other parts of Town redistricting was seen more as a Band-Aid rather than a solution, which participants felt ultimately was greater diversity that is native to each community driven by more granular housing stock.
- **Opportunities for greater partnerships with Town Universities.** Both Fairfield University and Sacred Heart University were cited as strengths of the Town throughout outreach events. However, many participants discussed the untapped potential of Fairfield Schools partnering with these universities. Ideas for partnership included developing a volunteer mentorship program between university and elementary and middle school students, inviting guest speakers to discuss career paths, and offering teachers and residents continuing education opportunities. In addition to greater partnerships between Fairfield Schools and the Town's universities, participants discussed the potential of proactive partnerships with the universities and the Town for cost sharing and programming.

COMMUNITY CHARACTER AND RESILIENCY

The historic fabric and unique character of Fairfield was widely cited as a strength of the community. Participants throughout outreach events expressed a strong desire to maintain and enhance these attributes especially in the face of increased flooding and sea level rise. In addition to the built environment, participants defined the community's character as friendly, welcoming, and multigenerational. Several issues regarding community character and resiliency arose throughout outreach events including:

- **Develop and enforce standards for new and redevelopment.** Throughout outreach events, participants discussed how they love the Town's many distinct neighborhoods and commercial corridors. However, many participants expressed concern over new development or substantial redevelopment of properties that are not in keeping with the current character of these areas. Participants proposed that the Town develop and enforce design standards for key areas of the community to eliminate the threat of new and redevelopment transforming the aesthetic appeal of these treasured areas.
- **Support active transportation options.** The infrastructure that supports walking and biking was mentioned during all outreach events. Participants felt as though the existing infrastructure does not encourage residents to walk or bike to destinations throughout Fairfield, especially the beaches and Downtown. Participants expressed a desire to complete the sidewalk network and develop bicycle lanes to not only support healthy transportation alternatives, but to also reduce the demand for parking.
- **Encourage and promote sustainability best practices.** The impacts of climate change including the threat of increased flooding and sea level rise were discussed throughout outreach events. Many participants expressed that they feel as though the Town could do more to encourage and promote sustainability best practices such as the use of solar panels, restriction of pesticide use, and preservation of open space and conservation properties.
- **Unify the community.** Perceived divisions in the community was a key theme that emerged during outreach. Residents and high school students discussed the division between the 06824 and 06825 -zip codes while university students expressed that they do not feel welcome or integrated into the larger Fairfield community. Participants developed many ideas to solve this issue including, equally investing in all commercial areas throughout the Town and hosting community events that bring residents and university students together.
- **Better local public transportation.** Both University students and seniors expressed an interest in better cross-town transportation options. Each constituent had slightly different justifications but similar to concerns raised with pedestrian and bicycle access, both groups had the same observation and concerns about the difficulty of cross-town transportation.

- **Maintaining affordability and desirability for Seniors.** The community recognizes that a key strength of the community is its multi-generational construct. Seniors are recognized as a vital and contributing component of the community. The ability to maintain the conditions that make the Town a desirable place for seniors to remain is essential and was widely discussed across many sessions. Viewpoints were shared that continued focus is needed to maintain affordability and desirability here for seniors. Discussion points included a) programs for seniors, b) housing options to accommodate the seniors wishing to downsize and remain in Town, and c) a recognition that seniors contribute to the economic stability of the Town as property tax payers without drawing upon the significant education spending requirements.
- **The community views itself as an engaged and welcoming community, and supports steps to encourage this, communicate this, leverage this, and deepen this.** The Town and its residents are responsive to the needs of the community for financial support programs, health & welfare, and social support networks. This view was furthered to indicate a desire for supporting Bridgeport for both social and mutual advancement needs. Beyond social initiatives, the community is cognizant of the obligation to be a sustainable and environmentally conscious entity, in planning and execution.