

## Cultural, Historic, Natural, and Open Space Resources

March 2, 2021, 2:30-4:00pm

*\*Town Attendees: Chips Norcross, Joann Martin, Byam Stevens, Bob Kidd, Nicole Daviau, Mary Kronholm, John Piper, Linda Barnard*

*\*Consultants: Ken Comia, Shannon Walsh, Dounia Nouf, Alexis Lanzillotta, Cara Montague, Rowan Cignoni*

### Key Takeaways: Natural and Open Space Resources (Including Written Responses)

- Many different potential reasons to be drawn to Blandford depending on interest – genealogical interests, the views, open space, interest in Native American history.
- The White Church, fair grounds, open space and rural character are treasured in Town and people want them to be preserved.
  - Library about to be expanded, upgraded.
- “The most remarkable thing about this Town is the amount of open space and undeveloped land” – the outdoor lifestyle and activity is part of what draws people to living in Blandford.
- The brochure put together with hiking trails (done through Hilltown CDC) is well-received.
- The Springfield Water Department land is highly contentious – people lost access to it after 9/11 and have not had it returned. In this “quid pro quo” Blandford is not getting its fair share. There is very limited access. The relationship was unfriendly before and worse now. Employees of SWD show a lack of respect toward people of Blandford.
  - **Restoring access should be a top priority.**
- Much of the land is zoned as agricultural, and people want to keep that.
- Russell Pond and dam maintenance is unsettled; the Scouts own it since 1945 but maintenance of dam is up in the air.
- Priority should not be about “developing” outdoor parks but rather protecting them (such as Watson Park)
- Growth should be limited and low impact.
- **Turnpike exit is contentious.** Some fear it would forever change rural nature, and others consider it a significant opportunity to the Town.
- More communication between boards is critical.

## Key Takeaways: Cultural and Historic Resources (Including Written Responses)

- White Church, Library, Watson Park, Blandford Fair, Blandford Club, General Store, and Historical Society are tremendous assets.
- The library and Historical Society's historic and genealogical resources are strong.
  - Library is a member of CWMARS. Also provides internet, holds only existing collection of Country Journal. Looking for grant funding to have it digitized.
- In terms of hazard preparedness, the Historic society has fireproof storage (does not seem there is a larger plan for preserving records).
- The White Church has funding available to take care of it and its contents (including Henry Miller Grand Piano in White Church – restored)
- Community cultural events past and present include:
  - Summer concert series
  - Need to bring back in Welcome Wagon (was a short-term experience that hasn't happened in a few years but it was nice)
  - Used to have Back to Blandford days annually, then every few years, hasn't happened since 1970.
  - Blandford celebrating anniversary in 2022, tying in with Back to Blandford revival.
  - Mennonite community hosts large gathering with Mennonites from all over US (near Labor Day), hosts concert open to public.
- Issues & Opportunities include:
  - Threat - Internet – people are drawn inside and to screens rather than outside.
  - Lack of consensus about what makes a community - "Are we a community or just a bunch of houses in the woods?"
  - Issue isn't always lack of collaboration but lack of *volunteerism*. Always the same people. The Fair is an example of this – someone needs to take direction with it; needs "young blood".
  - Strength - Cultural council works to fund cultural activities (such as Summer Concert Series).
- Other:
  - Town doesn't want to compete with other larger regional draws but also don't want to be a "cultural wasteland."
  - What would be most helpful is if consultants visited Town! Make a tour, understand the Town better. In order to make recommendations need to understand Town.

## Transportation and Public Facilities & Services Focus Group

March 3, 2021, 10:00-11:30pm

*\*Town Attendees: Joann Martin, David Mottor, Judith MacKinnon, David Hopson, Peter Langmore, Mark Kronholm, Tammy Weidhaas*

*\*Consultants: Ken Comia, Gary Roux, Andy McCaul, Alexis Lanzillotta, Dounia Nouf, LeighAnne Taylor, Kate Bavelock*

### Key Takeaways: Transportation

- If you wanted to do a tour that only allowed one leg by car, parking at the post office and walking from there makes sense – a lot to see between Watson Park, General Store, White Church, library, etc.
- However, there are improvements that could be made to the park area to increase walkability.
- Complaints people hear:
  - Springfield Water Dept land cut off from walking
  - Another complaint is length of time it takes to get to any major store (But! Pointed out later – “It’s a trade-off people choose” when they move to Blandford.)
  - Not a lot of accessible places for people with limited mobility to walk easily.
  - Rt 23 – sight line issues for cyclists.
  - There are nice secondary roads that are safer for cycling, but nowhere to park.
  - Speed – “If you live here you know how fast you can go.” There is concern that if there is a turnpike exit, non-residents unfamiliar with Rt 23 will speed.
- On the other hand -- “It’s a hill town – that’s why we live here.” Perception that there is not much you can do to make it walkable.
- Expansion of the passenger rail east/west in Chester would be great.
- Strengths
  - COA vehicle donation (but also points to a need – it’s volunteer-run, what happens if vehicle breaks down, etc.)
  - There is potential to create a nice walking trail system (sidewalks and/or trails) in town center (hence the WalkAudit)
- Questions
  - Could Blandford Fairgrounds be explored for creating a walkable area? It is the flattest area in Town. (Concern about liability.)
  - Complete Streets Program – Could the Town explore this as an option? There are trade-offs to consider (need capacity; future projects are supposed to incorporate complete streets principles) but it provides funding for pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly infrastructure.
    - LeighAnne – Points out that the WalkAudit findings can lend themselves to a Complete Streets application.

### Key Takeaways: Public Facilities & Services

- Rely heavily on Josh, don't want him to get stretched too thin.
- Communication could be improved – message inboxes get full and Joann and Josh are left to answer a lot of questions
- Need better, more consistent communication across all boards, committees, etc. – Possibly as All Boards Meetings at regular intervals.
- Major accomplishments include hiring Town Administrator.
- **Reliance on volunteers – strength and weakness.** Chief Mottor is only paid person on fire department. People aren't volunteering as much as they used to.
- Town record keeping and archiving is essential – need a plan for that.
- Comments about Departments:
  - Fire and ambulance terrific, help with seniors
  - Transfer station is "superlative".
  - Fire department does outstanding job with training personnel;
    - Could there be a training surrounding strokes and how to respond because hospital is far and response time is crucial
  - Optimistic about new police chief; hopefully there will be more police presence
- Other Needs & Opportunities
  - Lack of awareness about MVP Plan and preparedness measures?
  - The Town needs a Chief Financial Officer and more Capital Planning
  - Opportunity for leveraging Town swimming area with Springfield Water and Sewer Commission – spot right off Rt 23.

## Housing and Economic Development Focus Group

March 4, 2021, 11:30-1:00pm

\*Town Attendees: Margit Mikuski, Edna Wilander, David Hopson, John Piper, Joann Martin

\*Consultants: Ken, Catherine, Fiona, Alexis, Ted, Patty

### Key Takeaways: Housing

- Seniors want to stay here but can't downsize. Hard to maintain large lots (2 acre lot minimum – perhaps needs review)
- Possibilities discussed include a smaller connected community for senior homes including maintenance or condos.
- ADUs are already allowed.
- Seniors can't easily stay if their needs are not supported. Too isolated.
- Families not coming in – why? Turnpike access would help. Biggest drop in enrollment comes after middle school.
- Summer residents from NY no longer common
- Encouraging cottage industries/work from home – would be a plus.

### Key Takeaways: Economic Development

- Demand for businesses dwindling, and impacting prices and availability
- The dump, schools, and senior services are important to obtain locally, but we have to have enough people to pay for them. The alternative is having the services pay for themselves or patronage
  - We need to build on what we have, but if it's not generating a profit it's not worth it
    - We had Blandford Ski and the golf course but lost them
- The population is growing at a slow pace.
- Agriculture is slowing. We are becoming a bedroom community where people are just passing through
  - But, we have very niche needs
  - The farms that do exist specialize in hay and maple syrup
- People don't want tourism. The people who live in Blandford choose to live here intentionally. (*Is this universal?*)
- Business models for agriculture: Ripley's blueberry farm, Maple Corner Farm, jelly operation by Mennonites
  - Other opportunities: mountain bike park, transform ski areas in the summer (Butternut)
  - The town still needs money and people
  - Christmas tree farms are dying
  - People going to Chester/Middlefield
- Half do and half do not want the Turnpike
  - Land in Blandford not conducive to development – "it takes millions and millions to do"
  - One kiosk was \$500,000
  - We need it for the future but attitudes are closed off
  - Drainage, set up, lack of infrastructure, environmental constraints
  - Joann reiterated the complaints with cost, but people also complaining about being here

## Blandford: Climate Change and Clean Energy Focus Group

March 4, 2021, 1:00-2:30pm

\*Town Attendees: Margit Mikuski, David Hopson, John Piper, Joann Martin, Tammy Weidhaas, Josh Garcia

\*Consultants: Ken Comia, Catherine Ratte, Fiona Coughlan, Alexis Lanzillotta

### Key Takeaways: Climate Change

- Our Master Plan effort has climate change twist – we need to utilize diverse resources to mitigate these issues
  - Need to incorporate “cool” strategies into this plan
  - Natural resources need to be tied into the plan
  - Need to have a positive twist
  - Blandford needs to make conscious decisions
  - Capacity needs to be managed in combination with other efforts
- Remote lifestyles have resulted in challenges
- Climate-related issues:
  - Power outages and Eversource has poor response time
  - Slower response rates with tornadoes
- Emergency Management Committee is more of an internal committee but the focus should be regional (basically defunct) – an internal advisory board
- Positives: in the event of an emergency, community comes together and the senior needs prioritized – strong sense of comradery; mobilization in an emergency situation
  - There is a list for seniors for emergency preparedness purposes
  - Community has historically come together – has been resilient
  - Working hard to cover our bases
- We have a “take care of it attitude”
- The National Guard has been deployed in emergencies in the past
  - An ice storm was the only issue in the past – miles of roads were treated and they did it well
  - A gap includes: addressing internal and mutual aid
- Trimming trees in an “ongoing/losing battle;” they are growing higher than the tree line
  - Trees keeping growing back
  - We have tree crews in town
- Maintenance of the water system and water lines take priority
- An emergency management strategy would be restarting and having a checklist in place with neighboring towns
  - Need a professional staff member to help with emergency management
  - Should consider tree planting and risk management
- A large portion of our population is elderly
  - The COA would like to see transportation vehicles
  - The COA has free and reduced lunch
  - There needs to be more intergenerational programs – needs destigmatization

## Key Takeaways: Clean Energy

- Energy efficiency efforts at Gateway Regional, as well as the school district and Town Hall
  - There is \$250,000/year available and Blandford is up for another round
- The Watson Park loop and the Downtown could be made more walkable and efforts have been put toward that; cluster neighborhoods
- Complete Streets discussion:
  - Limited, but should do
  - “Doesn’t apply to Blandford,” (Points to need for education)
  - Need interconnectedness
- Regionally, Blandford is ahead of its neighbors
  - It is a green community
  - It is an EV leader – cutting edge
  - Have hybrid police cruiser
- Communication infrastructure is a problem and electric/wireless capabilities
  - Communications are difficult because it is hilly
  - Large dead-zones in town – safety issues; question about repeaters for BFD – dispatch in the works
  - It would be great to get electricity and communication lines underground
    - What is cost effective vs. current maintenance
- **Blandford is volunteer-based which poses challenges**
- Be Green program is always looking for outreach opportunities
  - After school program at Town Hall
  - How do we bridge the gap? An all-boards meeting?
  - Can help bridge the gap between school kids and seniors
- Municipal challenges with clean energy
  - 6 solar projects reviewed recently – balance with the land – contentious
    - Blandford feels they are doing their part for the Commonwealth in this category
    - Don’t want trees torn down
    - Pilot payments not a benefit
    - Catherine asked about solarize program – need to secure a vendor agreeing to incentivize
- Push back on wind; this is in Russell