

A Progress Report and Recommendations for Revisions Concerning
Mansfield's 2012 Five Year Strategic Plan

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John R. Mullin, Ph.D., FAICP

Mullin Associates Inc.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this concise report is to summarize the findings of a charrette/workshop, held on October 24, 2015 at the Robinson School, designed to update the future direction for the next three years of the Town of Mansfield's Strategic Plan, which was completed in 2012. Approximately 50 citizens attended.

The Strategic Plan, by all accounts, has effectively guided the Town's growth and progress for the past three years. However, as noted by the participants, new issues and concerns have come to the fore and some priorities have shifted. This report summarizes these changes.

The charrette was divided into two parts. The first was an analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) that will influence the Town's future direction. The second consisted of the establishment of a set of priorities.

This report presents the findings of the SWOT Analysis. It is in four parts following this introduction. Part One is a list of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats currently perceived by the participants. Part Two is a list of the proposed actions identified by the participants. Part Three is the list of priorities noted by the participants, while Part Four represents the consultant's assessment on necessary actions.

Part I. STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS AS IDENTIFIED BY THE PARTICIPANTS: A SUMMARY

- Strengths
 - Cabot Business Park is attractive.

- The Mansfield school system is first rate.
- The Town's location is prime for business.
- The Town has beautiful open spaces.
- Downtown investment is occurring.
- There is a good regional transportation system.
- Town services are excellent.
- The train station brings people to downtown.
- The Route 106 Mural Project contributes to enhancing our culture.
- The administration has good financial discipline.
- The Town's infrastructure is in good condition.
- The political environment has improved.
- Municipal electric performs admirably.
- The leadership is listening to the citizens.
- Nearby amenities contribute to a high quality of life.
- The Airport is both a business and touristic asset.
- Quality hotels are nearby.
- Weaknesses
 - Downtown parking is at a premium.
 - Downtown access is difficult most hours of the day.
 - The need for free Wi Fi in downtown has been ignored.
 - The lack of civic participation by newcomers in local governance colors outcomes.

- Lack of communication for those without children isolates citizens.
- There is no vision for the future.
- The Town lacks an identity.
- Low voter turnout results in the few making major decisions.
- Downtown vacant lots contributes to a sense of decay.
- The perception of rising crime is not being addressed.
- Lack of “over 55” housing for older citizens may cause them to move out of town.
- The difficult permitting process is time consuming.
- Lack of foot traffic in downtown impacts sales.
- Opportunities
 - Cabot Business Park should be maintained before it’s too late.
 - Fix the parking near the train station.
 - The Chocolate Factory needs to be revitalized.
 - Develop free Wi Fi access in the downtown.
 - Allow pop up markets in the downtown.
 - Create food truck policies near the train station.
 - Expand open spaces throughout the Town.
 - Encourage new business growth.
 - There is a rich cultural base in Mansfield.
 - Bike ways across Town (including Cabot) should be constructed.
 - A cultural district could be established in downtown.

- Encourage re-use of the old North Main Street fire station for retail or restaurant use.
- Help the school system to move to Tier One.
- Prioritize possible open space purchases.
- Create safe routes to schools.
- Threats
 - There is declining school population.
 - An outmoded Cabot Business Park may lead to vacancies.
 - Rising tax rates will drive business away.
 - Crowded streets and roads will cause shoppers to go elsewhere.
 - Continual decay of downtown lots and buildings will harm downtown's future.
 - There is concern over rising crime particularly at Great Woods.
 - Rise in average age of population will mean a shift in priorities.
 - There is declining civic engagement.
 - There is a lack of communications across town.
 - Retail sprawl is occurring along our highways.
 - The Town is becoming generic: It is losing its character.

Part II. ACTIONS THAT WERE PROPOSED BY THE CHARRETTE PARTICIPANTS

- Downtown
 - Prepare a downtown plan.
 - Improve parking near the train station.
 - The town should provide free Wi Fi in downtown.

- A possible downtown business friendly hotel should be explored.
- The Chocolate Factory plan should be finalized.
- Pop up markets should be promoted.
- Food trucks near the train station should be considered.
- A market study is needed.
- Parking remains a problem.
- The Town should promote development on empty lots.
- The Town should carefully control the development of condominiums and apartments so as to maintain the character of downtown.
- The downtown should reflect the Town's history and character.
- Downtown needs an identity.
- Cabot Business Park
 - Create a task force on its future.
 - Apply green principles to the park.
 - Promote the park to young entrepreneurs.
 - Protect its character.
 - Help to market the park.
 - The division of its property must be addressed in order to gain cohesion.
- Schools
 - Prepare a plan for the future of the campus.
 - Examine the impact of the student population "Bubble".
 - Maintain the quality of the schools.

- Show value of schools to the Town's people.
- Increase innovation instruction.
- Open Space, Natural and Cultural Resources
 - Show value of parks/recreation areas.
 - Update Recreation/Open Space Plan.
 - Ensure open space/recreation access.
 - Collect data on uses: What do we do with it?
 - Promote resources across Town.
 - Become more pro-active on issues.
 - Adopt smart growth principles.
 - Lower carbon footprint.
- Housing
 - Need to provide housing that matches the salary of workers.
- Infrastructure
 - Improve parking in downtown.
 - Improve traffic flow.
 - Prepare an updated public transportation plan.
- Public Safety
 - Develop a plan to meet peak traffic periods.
 - Determine methods to reduce crime.
 - Add additional staff.
- Culture

- Mansfield needs to better define its identity.
- Mansfield needs a vision of what it wants to be.
- Mansfield should look to Gloucester, Lexington, Amherst, Northampton, Waltham and Lowell for ideas for downtown.
- Mansfield needs to define and protect its cultural resources.
- Senior Citizens
 - Develop plan to maintain citizens in their homes.
- Financial Discipline
 - Continue Improvements made over the last three years.
 - Continue to pursue state and federal grants.

Part III. PRIORITIES OF THE PARTICIPANTS: A SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

- On Cabot Business Park: Develop a task force focusing on its future.
- On Downtown: Address parking and access issues.
- On Schools: Undertake demographic and school facility studies.
- On Open Space: Continue to purchase new land through grants.
- On Public Safety: Develop plan to meet peak demand for services.
- On Culture: Create an identity.
- On Senior Citizens: Develop a plan to maintain seniors in their homes.
- On Public Information: Quickly develop and implement a plan.
- On Financial Discipline: Continue the process of last three years.
- On Infrastructure: Develop an updated transportation plan.

Part IV. ASSESSMENT

It was clear from the participants comments there is strong confidence in the Town's administration and, more specifically, the work of the Planning Department, in implementing the Strategic Plan. Indeed, the number of tasks identified in the 2012 Strategic Plan which have been completed and are ongoing is both impressive and admirable. However, there are still areas needing further attention and new issues have emerged. The following are the consultants' thoughts and recommendations for further action. They are based on interviews with the Town Planner and Town Manager, the views of the charrette participants, a review of planning related documents and our own thoughts.

- Cabot Office Park

While an ongoing dialogue with the owners and tenants of the Park has been established, and the zoning has been updated, the Park continues to age. Its buildings and layout reflect the 1970's and hardly match the qualities of a cutting edge 21st century office/industrial complex. What's more, some Park owners are now selling off individual parcels and the future of Covidien, one of the largest owners/lessees, as a resident of the Park is still in question. The issues facing the Town and the Park are not yet in crises mode. It is still a beautiful place to work, well infrastructured and well located to meet current and future demand. In short, if the Town acts now, it will be able to act in a manner ensuring it remains one of the premier business parks in New England for decades to come. With the above points in mind, the following action is recommended:

- The Town should create a task force on the future of the Park. Its charge will be to a) obtain testimony from the owners, tenants and residents to determine their concerns over the future of the park; b) compare the park

with five of the most successful and modern industrial/office parks across the country to determine the factors that have influenced their excellent results and how they could be adapted to Cabot; c) explore the possibility of creating an Industrial/Office Business Improvement District for the Park; and d) send a report of its findings to the Town Manager, Board of Selectmen, Town Planner, the Planning Board and the Industrial Development Commission. This should be staffed by the Town Planner with the assistance of consultants and completed within the next year.

- Downtown

The downtown has made substantial progress over the past three years as new investments in infrastructure, building regeneration and businesses have occurred.

There are still key actions that need to be faced. These are noted below.

- The Town should provide free Wi Fi throughout downtown. This will increase foot traffic and cause shoppers to visit the area for a longer period.
- The Town has made progress on the rail crossing issue but access issues still must be resolved. It is not a time to relax on this issue: It will, we expect, take a long time to gain approval and, when parking becomes a further crisis, will be a bottleneck to progress unless it is resolved.
- The Town should develop a strategy to attract pop up markets and food truck activity at key points in downtown. Most notably, the placing of these activities near the train station should be encouraged.
- Downtown is improving dramatically. The Chocolate Factory project, the North Common Estates project, the St. John's Episcopal Church renovation

and many other investments will be completed within the next three years.

With these points in mind, the Town should ensure market rate housing on upper floors occurs. Sites near the train station appear to be prime locations.

- The Planning Department should undertake a study of downtown land uses that, on a plot-to-plot basis, identifies those properties that are currently a strength, weakness, opportunity or threat to its future. It should also determine where there is owner interest in improving their property, as well as owners who are allowing their properties to decay. The purpose of this study would be to pinpoint those properties where focused actions could lead to improvement.
- The Planning Department should consider purchasing market data that would show trends in downtown and where market leakage is occurring. This should be presented to downtown merchants, building owners and town officials.
- With all of the previous actions underway, the time to explore the creation of a Business Improvement District is now. Indeed, the support of merchants and owners for all of the above recommendations will be essential and a management entity could ensure they are accomplished in a professional manner.
- Schools

Throughout the workshops, focus groups and a charrette undertaken as part of the preparation of the 2012 Strategic Plan, there was considerable concern over school

budgeting, relations between the Finance Committee and School Committee and participation of the School Department in town wide issues. All of these concerns have been addressed to an extensive degree. At the 2015 charrette, however, new issues were raised that were not mentioned during the 2012 citizen participation process. Most notably was a recognition of the need to carefully monitor the school population as it moves through the system: There are some indications of a "bubble" of a large cohort of students moving to the upper levels that is not being sustained by growth in the lower levels. This may require a shift in resources and a hard look at future school needs. In light of this, now may be the time to prepare a long term school facilities plan which not only addresses the needs of the students and faculty but how they could be integrated with other community functions including the Library, Council on Aging and community recreation. It should also focus on the traffic issues surrounding the campus each morning and afternoon. With these points in mind, we recommend the following:

- It is important the shared budgeting system be continued and enhanced. Not only will it result in efficiencies but generate extensive good will across town.
- It is essential that a long term comprehensive assessment of the future school population be undertaken that not only addresses enrollment but future space requirements.
- The assessment noted in the previous recommendation should also address the possibility of integration of future town library needs as well as senior citizen programs and town recreation needs on the school campus.
- In light of the traffic issues along streets near the campus, the School

Department and the Planning Department should explore the creation of a satellite lot where parents could offload and pickup students without causing traffic issues.

- Infrastructure

Almost all of the infrastructure issues raised in the 2012 Strategic Plan are being addressed. The regional waste water district investments received extensive praise from the participants at the 2015 charrette and there was general satisfaction over automobile and pedestrian access activities related to the commuter rail station and throughout downtown. Positive comments were also received concerning the plans to replace the DPW facility and the Police and North Main Street Fire Stations. The one shortcoming that emerged was the lack of results concerning downtown parking. With this point in mind one recommendation emerges:

- It is essential the Town make efforts to expand parking in the downtown area with particular attention to the property near the CSX crossing.

- Public Safety

All of the critical issues identified in the 2012 Strategic Plan are being addressed. The only new concern raised by the participants was a perception of rising crime.

- Open Space, Natural and Cultural Resources

There has been significant progress in this category. The update of conservation maps and the build out assessment deserve praise. Moreover, the mural in downtown is a wonderful contribution to the town's character. There are, however, concerns related

to the lack of pursuit of funds to acquire open space and the need to update the Open Space Plan. With these points in mind, there are two recommendations:

- The Town needs to ensure its Open Space Plan is current.
- The Town needs to pursue funds through state and federal grants to purchase additional open space.

- Housing

There was little comment on housing needs for the town. Perhaps this is due to the fact the town has 12% of its housing rated as affordable and is more than meeting the state criteria for affordability. In any case, there is still the need to carefully monitor housing development and ensure the town continues to meet the Commonwealth's 10% minimum threshold. Moreover, the one action noted in the 2012 study called for the coordination of the actions of the Mansfield Housing Authority and Local Housing Partnership. No action has been taken on this action. No new actions are recommended.

- The Council on Aging

There was little discussion on Council of Aging needs and facilities. It is urged however, that its concerns should be included in the discussion on the future of school facilities.

FINAL THOUGHTS

While the 2015 Charrette was intended to determine if the 2012 Strategic Plan was meeting the needs of Mansfield and whether or not the priorities had changed, there are several areas that were minimally addressed and where further research may be required.

These are the following:

- The results of the build out map exercise need to be made public. The information needs to be integrated into a fiscal impact analysis and the findings distributed to the Finance Committee and, ultimately, Town Meeting.
- The goals and objectives of the Airport Master Plan and the Open Space Plan should be integrated into the Town's Strategic Plan.
- The results of new investments due to Planning Department activities (i.e.: grants, regulatory reforms, technical support) should be calculated such that the Town knows of its extraordinary work.
- There is still need to improve communications with the public concerning planning and economic development activities. An internal communications plan is in order.
- The Town should consider approving the Community Preservation Act as many of the recommendations found in this report could be funded through its revenues.