

BDC MEETING NOTES

DATE: Thursday, June 12 at 2pm

Meeting Attendees:

Tawni Whitney, Freeport Economic Development Corp & Freeport Chamber of Commerce

Councilor Johnson

Councilor Ambrosino

Mandy Reynolds

Dan Reed

Bill Braman

Marc Meyers

OVERVIEW: Discussion on Downtown Revitalization Strategies

This transcript captures a discussion centered on downtown revitalization strategies, focusing on the experiences and approaches of Freeport, Maine, and comparing them with those of Bath. The conversation explores various tactics, including grant programs, community engagement, addressing NIMBYism, and fostering relationships with property owners and businesses. The participants aim to share insights and best practices for creating vibrant and welcoming downtown areas.

Cooperation and Trust with Property Owners

The discussion highlights the importance of cooperation and trust between the town and property owners. Freeport found success by walking the streets and engaging with property owners, especially during the vulnerable period during/after COVID-19. This built trust, which continues to drive their efforts. The relationships have allowed Freeport to fill storefronts, achieving the lowest vacancy rate since 2000, at 5.7%. This was achieved by property owners being "willing to take in tenants at a below market rate". The success of Freeport's downtown is attributed to these relationships, with property owners willing to accept less to stop the "bleeding" and recover.

Addressing NIMBYism and Community Engagement

The speakers discuss the challenges of NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard) and the importance of community engagement. Freeport addressed this by creating its own "YIMBY group" (Yes In My

Backyard) attached to specific projects, ensuring that supporting voices are heard and providing support for council decisions. The Principle Group played a key role in finding the voice of the community during the downtown Vision Planning process, using tools like surveys, community engagement meetings, and big ideas surveys, to gauge opinions on projects like dog parks and building designs. This approach demonstrated that the plans were community-driven, mitigating NIMBYism.

Loan and Grant Programs

The conversation delves into the specifics of Freeport's loan and grant programs, particularly a matching grant program offering UP TO \$10,000. The program is open to national, regional, and local businesses. The grant often makes the difference for businesses choosing Freeport, as it makes them "feel wanted". The funds for the grant program come from the town, not the FEDC. While a 0% loan program exists, grants are more attractive to businesses. The council is currently deciding whether to replenish the grant program, recognizing its value in attracting businesses.

The Role of the Freeport Economic Development Corporation (FEDC)

The FEDC plays a crucial role in Freeport's economic development, acting as a "welcoming party". While the town handles codes and regulations, the FEDC proactively seeks out potential businesses, offering confidential initial conversations. They attend conferences, meet with potential businesses, and assess potential hurdles. The FEDC also facilitates connections between businesses and key stakeholders, such as L.L.Bean executives. This proactive approach involves identifying community needs and seeking out businesses that fit those needs, even contacting national chains and smaller independent local and regional businesses.

Property Owners and Vacancy Taxes

The discussion addresses the challenges of dealing with property owners, especially those who are out-of-state or have different priorities. Direct and honest conversations are seen as the most effective way to build trust and address their needs. The idea of a vacancy tax, implemented in Rumford, is discussed, but the consensus is that it could be counterproductive and that building relationships is a better approach. One participant states, "I personally think that I really trust in relationships. I think [a vacancy tax is] an insult".

Collaboration and Future Strategies

BATH FOCUS: The participants emphasize the importance of collaboration between various organizations, including Main Street, the Chamber of Commerce, the Development Corporation, and

the city. They acknowledge the need to take action and move forward, even if it takes time to see results. The conversation touches on the challenges of historic structures requiring significant investment and the need for landlords to continuously invest in their properties. Matching grants are suggested as a way to incentivize property improvements. The importance of telling success stories and planning for potential setbacks is also highlighted.

Key Takeaways and Conclusions

The discussion concludes with a reaffirmation of the importance of community engagement, collaboration, and proactive strategies for downtown revitalization. Building strong relationships with property owners, addressing NIMBYism through inclusive processes, creating a local group of YIMBYs through grassroots development, and offering targeted grant programs are key elements of Freeport's success. The participants agree on the need to continue these efforts and adapt approaches to address ongoing challenges, such as property vacancies and changing economic conditions. The conversation underscores the value of a welcoming community and the importance of fostering a sense of partnership between the town, businesses, and property owners.