

**Economic Growth and Development in
Wareham, Massachusetts:**

Results of a Focus Group Study

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Introduction

Following a request from the Town of Wareham via Selectman Alan Slavin, personnel from the Division of External Affairs, Bridgewater State University (Facilitator Frederick Clark, JD and Scribe Diana Jennings, PhD) agreed to conduct focus groups. Four focus groups were convened between September 2013 and March 2014, one at AD Makepeace in Wareham and the remainder on campus at Bridgewater State University. Participants provided information through group discussion. A total of 21 individuals participated.

The discussion was designed to gather information from participants around the following topics:

1. Concerning all Town services, zoning and bylaws, what works for your business, as it is, today?
2. What is not working? (include workforce skills and education)
3. What changes are needed to allow you to be stable? to have growth/expansion?
4. What do you think the Town needs in order to attract commercial and manufacturing growth?
5. What changes are needed to make Wareham attractive to new residents?

Participants represented development companies, retail, agricultural interests, real estate investors, small businesses, banking, education, and "ordinary citizens". Each session was facilitated by Fred Clark, JD, Executive Vice President, Bridgewater State University; Diana Jennings, PhD was the scribe. The questions above were circulated to the participants in advance, thus framing the conversation in the focus groups.

In order to create an atmosphere of honest and helpful discourse, each group was informed that their candid remarks would be used as the basis of a report but that their input would be presented without attribution.

Through these groups we gathered information concerning issues of community and commercial growth and development for the town of Wareham. In this report, we perform a SWOT analysis based on the focus group comments. [Disclaimer: the views expressed in this report are those of the participants and are not necessarily those of Bridgewater State University]. An appendix is provided that organizes the inputs by the questions asked.

SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths:

The comments of the focus group members sketch an asset map for the town of Wareham.

Physical assets. Respondents acknowledged that the town has many physical assets, including the extensive waterfront, highway access, large spaces, proximity to major cities and good infrastructure. The beauty of Onset along with its access to Cape Cod and Buzzards Bay was mentioned repeatedly. One thousand acres of cranberry bogs preserve open space. "Bogs are the national parks of this community."

Economic assets. Compared to surrounding towns, Wareham has more in its industrial business base. The Hospital and other medical offices and facilities were cited as a significant asset, both as employers and quality health care providers.

Community values. Some expressed the view that diversity is celebrated in Wareham with the Cape Verdean community cited as a source of strength. As a "right-to-farm" community, Wareham is known as a town that values and celebrates agriculture. Wareham's history is a source of value, as this year marks 275 years since its incorporation.

New leadership. Wareham's recent history has been characterized by divisive town meetings as well as citizens' lack of trust and confidence in town leadership and its processes. Generally, focus group respondents were hopeful with changes in the Board of Selectmen, the New Superintendent and pleased with the new Town Administrator.

Business is willing to partner. The focus groups included employers who expressed a desire to partner with the town as it moves forward.

Weaknesses:

Town Government. One quote captures the general tone: "Government is characterized by individual silos and frequently well-intended but uneducated volunteers." Though respondents are hopeful about the leadership, dissatisfaction with Town Hall nonetheless abounds, especially around issues of planning and zoning. The lack of a planner is keenly felt. Participants broadly expressed dissatisfaction with the current Open Town Meeting structure and some suggested revisiting the Town Charter. The Representative Town Meeting structure employed by Dartmouth was suggested as a model.

Few on boards are professionals; Wareham no longer gives a special dispensation to municipal employees to serve on boards because of Conflict of Interest. Many group

members expressed that boards need proper training and certification. "An appointment letter should include a requirement for training."

Planning was a focus of great concern by all of the groups. The Planning Board, which is appointed in Wareham, is viewed as weak: "Wareham has never empowered its Planner or Planning Board." By contrast, the Zoning Board of Appeals, with its "dedicated" chair, is seen as strong and in many respects doing the work of the Planning Board. Planning in general is seen to be in disarray: "There is no economic development plan, no priorities and poor communication. There is not an integrated process. Advertisements are improper and "officials check after plans are approved instead of during the process". "Permitting is slow". Follow-up on conditions rarely occurs. Files and records for plans are problematic and disorganized. Customer service out of town hall, related to planning and permitting can be poor." Respondents ask for a planner who has vision and who understands the potential of the town.

Employment Issues. In December 2013, the unemployment rate in Wareham was 7.0%. Respondents voice the need for "good jobs", indicating that for the educated, there are few places to work in Wareham.

Schools. Schools and the marketing for them must be improved. "Schools are a mixed bag." Perception of the schools outstrips the reality, but students are migrating to Old Rochester, the Upper Cape Regional Tech, and private schools. Morale among teachers is a problem. Middle and elementary schools are level 3 (Corrective Action). "The town rejects overrides and teachers don't get consistent support." "A strong charter school is needed."

The perception of schools drags down the housing market. However, it's not well known that the high school is a level 1 school, having made the necessary MCAS performance improvements in 2013.

Housing. The real estate market is based primarily on the second home-buyer; buyers in search of a primary home "don't want their kids there [in Wareham]". Home prices are similar to those seen in Brockton, but given the job market, affordability of housing is a deterrent: "with lot sizes as they are, how can youth afford to live here?" Meanwhile, another view is that "40B is a nonissue because market rates are already so low."

While 55-and-over housing developments are booming in some areas, a large percentage of Wareham's seniors live in mobile homes. Many of these seniors are snowbirds or low-income. Mobile homes contribute to nitrogen loading.

With respect to apartments, many believe that there are thousands of illegal units. Recently, the Board of Health began to require Apartment inspections, a move that many in these groups found ill-advised. These inspections mandate that landlords have to pay one hundred dollars to be certified. Some focus group members indicated that the fee penalizes good landlords as the "bad" landlords will ignore the regulation or take the fine.

Transient housing is also a weakness, particularly in Onset. "It can be hard to house clients in Wareham. There are few rooming houses to stay in, and not that many restaurants." The former will be addressed in part by the Marriott that is being built; the latter could be handled by increasing the number of liquor permits.

Parking. Parking was repeatedly cited as a weakness both in Onset and in the downtown area.

Opportunities

To many of our participants, addressing weaknesses mentioned above and the threats mentioned below will have positive consequences for Wareham. There are also other opportunities for growth and development.

Better Marketing. So many of Wareham's problems seem intractable because the marketing has not kept up with the good things that are happening, such as the 2013 designation of Wareham High as a Level 1 School. Growth in tourism and business development will benefit: "Sell the town beyond the town. The time is now!"

Cranberry bogs. The cranberry industry is in decline with serious competition coming from Wisconsin, Quebec and Chili. Most growers own 20 acres or less and have great difficulty selling their bogs. The bogs present good-sized parcels of land that can be the sites of creative development, providing that Zoning and Planning allow it. Bogs can be the site of cluster housing with on-site septic. Repurposed bogs can also be used for alternative energy such as solar and windpower. Zoning for these kinds of assets needs to be updated.

Cranberry bogs also rely on good earth removal policies. Earth removal bylaws should be assembled together with the Cranberry Growers Association to protect homeowners, towns and growers. Modifications of bogs can produce dirt that can be sold. This requires trucking. Sand is trucked in as well to help eliminate pesticide use. There are model bylaws and best practices which should be reasonably discussed.

The Cranberry Station. "Can this station be used as a land-use planning think-tank?" It's never used when Zoning issues are raised. Participants wonder if there could be help from the station in discerning what the real nitrogen loading situation is.

Higher Education interactions. Location of college offerings in Wareham "would really raise the level" (presumably of educational attainment).

Train Service. The proposed South Coast Rail was viewed as both an opportunity and a threat. Certainly this form of transportation might make other job markets outside of Wareham more accessible to Wareham residents, and promote tourism. However, some felt that the location of a station in Downtown Wareham is not as sensible as one at say, the "Old" Walmart given proximity to large amounts of parking for commuters. One or two people felt that those who commuted to work by train would be less committed to the Wareham community.

Threats

Poverty, drugs and crime. By far, Wareham's systemic poverty, with its attendant phenomena of drug abuse and crime are widely regarded as the greatest threats across all of the focus groups. "There is systemic poverty in Wareham, and a cottage industry of foster placement." "The homeless population is large and underserved." "Wareham likes to compare itself to Marion and Falmouth but it's neither." There are thousands of illegal apartments. Some focus group members suggest that fostering children is a way to make a living in Wareham.

Flood Insurance. This issue received extensive discussion in two of the focus groups. Rising flood insurance costs will be crippling for all in the flood zones. "Bad science has driven the FEMA map formulation". No one wants to be near the flood plain. This will cause another real estate crisis for the town. Scituate, by contrast, mobilized for flood map appeals and some felt that Wareham should do the same. (Note: A federal flood insurance reform bill was passed on March 19, 2014; presumably this threat has passed.)

Environmental issues. Wareham's extensive waterfront is a fragile asset that must be guarded wisely. Nitrogen loading is a big concern. "We must pay attention to environmental/quality of life issues." "There should be tree plantings and an increased effort to mitigate the increasing pollution to Buzzards Bay."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This SWOT analysis captures the key issues raised by the focus groups. At the close of each focus group session, participants were informed of current efforts underway to utilize sophisticated tools like the EDSAT developed out of Northeastern University by Professor Barry Bluestone. This tool will be deployed in Wareham through a combined effort by the Town, Bridgewater State University, A.D. Makepeace, and Northeastern University. Noted one participant: "I'm buoyed by the fact that the town is making this effort. Thank you, town officials, for this opportunity."

Appendix: Inputs organized by Question

Topic 1: What works for your business, as it is, today?

- a. **Physical assets.** Respondents acknowledged that the town has many physical assets, including the extensive waterfront, highway access, large spaces, proximity to major cities and good infrastructure.
- b. **Business assets.** Compared to surrounding towns Wareham has more in its industrial business base.
- c. **Community values.** Some expressed the view that diversity is celebrated in Wareham. Additionally, "the community values farming"
- d. **New leadership.** "There are now five selectmen who work well together. This is a good starting point." "The new superintendent has a great attitude."

Topic 2: What is not working?

- a. **General issues with Town Government.** "Government is characterized by individual silos and frequently well-intended but uneducated volunteers." "There were several remarks indicating that Open Town Meeting can be an obstacle to change; some suggested a revision of the Town Charter."
- b. **Planning in general is in disarray.** Respondents ask for a planner who has vision and who understands the potential of the town. There is no economic development plan, no priorities and poor communication. There is not an integrated process. Advertisements are improper and "officials check after plans are approved instead of during the process". "Permitting is slow". Follow-up on conditions rarely occurs. Files and records for plans are problematic and disorganized. Customer service out of town hall can be poor. "The ZBA does the job that the Planning Board should do."
- c. **Educational attainment is a problem.**
- d. **Perception of the schools outstrips the reality,** but students are migrating to Old Rochester, the Upper Cape Regional Tech, and private schools. Morale among teachers is a problem.
- e. **Two water departments, two fire departments, 2 chiefs.**
- f. **Poverty and the lack of good jobs are major issues.** "There is systemic poverty in Wareham, and a cottage industry of foster placement. "The homeless population is large and underserved. For the educated, there are few places to work in Wareham."

Topic 3: What changes are needed to allow you to be stable? to have growth/expansion?

- a. **Fast-track commercial development;** the commercial/hospitality base needs to be broader.
- b. **Professional roles and responsibilities of planning and other boards.** Few on boards are professionals. "Lots of lawsuits cost the town money!"
- c. **Reexamine policy around alternative energy.** Alternative energy, often utilized by independent growers is not well received by the ZBA or selectmen, with bylaws being voted down. There is no bylaw for wind turbines.
- d. **Bogs can be a development opportunity.** "Growers cannot sell their bogs. This is a crisis for independent growers and an opportunity for development." "Eliminate the Mobile Home parks and put in septic... mobile home parks have a big impact on nitrogen loading." Cranberry growers could sell rights that they could have otherwise had to develop their properties for residential or commercial uses to the mobile home park owners for purposes of expanding and improving the infrastructure of those compact and landlocked communities.
- e. **Another look at Earth removal bylaws.** Earth removal bylaws should be assembled together with the cranberry growers association to protect homeowners, towns and growers. Modifications of bogs can produce dirt that can be sold. This requires trucking. Sand is trucked in as well to help eliminate pesticide use. There are model bylaws and best practices which should be reasonably discussed.
- f. **Communication.** "Better connections between the Town and the Cranberry Growers Association."
- g. **Improve parking in Onset and downtown.**
- h. **Apartment inspections.** Apartment inspections required by the Board of Health mandate that landlords have to pay one hundred dollars to be certified. The views expressed by some focus group members indicated the sense that the fee penalizes good landlords as the "bad" landlords will ignore the regulation or take the fine.
- i. **Hospitality.** It can be hard to house clients in Wareham. There are few rooming houses to stay in, and not that many restaurants. The former will be addressed in part by the Marriott that is being built; the latter could be handled by increasing the number of liquor permits.
- j. **Cranberry Station:** Can the cranberry station be better connected with the education system? Can it be used as a land use planning think-tank? The station is a resource but is never used when zoning issues come up. Perhaps the new scientist there can help discern what the real nitrogen loading situation is.
- g. **Wareham needs to stand up against rising flood insurance premiums.** The impact of the increases will be devastating. "Bad science has driven the FEMA map formulation". No one wants to be near the flood plain. This will cause another real

estate crisis for the town. Scituate, by contrast, mobilized for flood map appeals. (Note: A federal flood insurance reform bill that U.S. Congressman Bill Keating describes as a "compromise" is set for a vote this week.)

- h. **Improvements in Earth removal bylaws are needed.** "Bylaws are often inconsistent with state law and are thrown out."
- i. **The cluster model needs to be better utilized.** Independent growers could use it.
- j. **Better marketing for tourism and business development.** "Sell the town beyond the town. The time is now!"

Topic 4: What do you think the Town needs in order to attract commercial and manufacturing growth?

- a. **A planner and a plan.** "There needs to be a planner." "An economic development plan is needed."
- b. **Educate town board members.** There should be proper training and certification of board members with "certification requirements as part of the appointment letter."
- c. **Facilitate permitting.** "There should be an ombudsman to walk permits around" and thank businesses for investing.

Topic 5: What changes are needed to make Wareham attractive to new residents?

- a. **Schools and the marketing for them must be improved.** "Schools are a mixed bag." "The town rejects overrides and teachers don't get consistent support." "A strong charter school is needed." "Upper Cape Regional Tech School is another major resource." The perception of schools drags down the housing market. It's not well known that the high school is a level 1 school, though middle and elementary schools are at level 3.
- b. **Crime and the perception of it have to be addressed.** With drugs, gangs, knifings, low income areas near the waterfront... the huge waterfront allows drugs to come in by the water.
- c. **Affordability of housing.** "With lot sizes as they are, how can youth afford to live here?" However, "40B is a nonissue because market rates are already so low."
- d. **The Town's history is an asset.** "History...should be embraced and brought forward. This can build pride."
- e. **A college would "raise the level."**
- f. **The Cape Verdean community is an asset and should be raised up.** "They need to have a society. They are a real success story" "Diversity is celebrated here"

- g. **The Hospital is an asset that should be marketed.** "The Hospital is a real magnet and a large employer."
- h. **Onset.** Onset is beautiful but was built before zoning laws. Buildings are close together and sewage is an issue. The burned-down Ocean Spray plant is a problem.
- i. **Train service.** Some fear that the train service would turn Wareham into a bedroom community for Boston. However, it might attract young professionals to settle. One person commented that the train station should be at the present location of Walmart, not in the downtown.
- j. **Environmental/quality of life issues.** We must pay attention to environmental/quality of life issues. There should be tree plantings and an increased effort to mitigate the increasing pollution to Buzzards Bay.

