

Technical Assistance for Sustainable Communities: Building Blocks

Technical Assistance Tool: Fiscal and Economic Health

Town of Winchester, Connecticut

To: Dale Martin, Town of Winchester
From: Bill Fulton, Roger Millar & Shelly Hazle, Smart Growth America
Date: April 2, 2013
Re: Suggested Next Steps for Town of Winchester

Background

In late 2012, the Town of Winchester (Winsted), Connecticut applied for and was selected to receive technical assistance from Smart Growth America. The assistance, “Planning for Economic and Fiscal Health,” provides an overview of how land use planning decisions can impact the fiscal and economic well being of communities. The workshop takes a look at differing development patterns – both sprawling patterns and more compact “smart growth” patterns – and what those land-use decisions mean in a changing world. The macro-level changes occurring in the demographic make-up of the nation, the housing market, and the economy are discussed. This assistance was provided with grant support from US EPA's Office of Sustainable Communities under their Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities Program. In signing the Memorandum of Understanding for our technical assistance award with the Town of Winchester, Smart Growth America committed to delivering a final report summarizing the workshop on fiscal and economic health and recommending specific strategies based on the needs and opportunities identified by participants there.

The technical assistance was delivered February 20 – 21, 2013 at Whiting Mills in Winsted, CT. The assistance included a presentation on February 20, followed by an all-day workshop on February 21. Both events were open to town administrators, business leaders, community leaders, and the general public. The Smart Growth America team worked with participants to identify opportunities for the community, as well as barriers and issues that might be impeding the ability of town leaders to implement the plans for Winsted and revitalize the downtown.

The intent of the workshop was neither for Smart Growth America to create a plan nor bind the community to any particular course of action, but rather to facilitate a discussion within the community about how to implement

Purpose of this Memo

The two days of presentations and discussion were designed to help the Town of Winchester begin to focus on Winsted's economic development and downtown revitalization needs and to identify the ways that smart growth strategies could be used by the community in meeting those needs. This memo serves

as a final report and summarizes the discussions that took place. It also recommends specific strategies based on the needs and opportunities identified by participants.

The information below is presented as a starting point for future conversations about growth and development in Winsted. It can be used in whatever manner the Town of Winchester chooses in order to approach ongoing concerns about future growth and change in the community.

Smart growth and fiscal and economic health

While communities have always been concerned about their fiscal (bottom line) and economic (general economic well-being) health, the recent economic recession has heightened these concerns in many places.

An important way for communities to better their fiscal and economic health is to understand the impact of land-use decisions and change their decision-making processes and criteria to optimize fiscal and economic well-being. Communities should ask: Does the life-cycle cost of new development – upfront infrastructure, ongoing service provision and eventual repair and maintenance – cost more or less to the town than it produces in tax revenue? Does new growth and development in the community add to or detract from the creation of jobs, wealth, retail sales, etc.?

In approaching these questions in the Town of Winchester and elsewhere, it is important to consider national trends.

1. Our nation's Demographics are changing in a way that is profoundly affecting the housing market.

Demographic trends are moving the housing market strongly away from traditional suburban housing. The vast majority of new households being formed are one- and two-person households. Therefore, the demand for smaller housing units is increasing. In addition, the two biggest demographic groups in the nation – retiring Baby Boomers and Millennials (18-30-year-olds) are both expressing a strong preference for a more walkable, urban/village lifestyle. Indeed, a significant percentage of Millennials choosing to live without cars altogether.

2. The formula for economic growth is changing.

Thanks to advances in technology, a shifting economy, and the changing desires of workers, businesses today are much more flexible, mobile, and collaborative. Many businesses now have the ability to choose where they locate – thanks to technology they are not bound by geography. This means that companies are increasingly making decisions about where they locate based primarily on where they can attract a talented workforce. This means that place matters even more because talented people, especially Millennials, are looking to locate in vibrant, walkable communities.

3. Suburban development patterns are making it more difficult for local governments to balance their budgets.

Suburban development patterns require extensive investments in capital infrastructure and ongoing costs to provide services. Low-density development requires more infrastructure to serve fewer people and

requires service providers such as firefighters and school buses to travel farther. More compact development patterns reduce both up-front infrastructure development costs and ongoing operating costs.

Not all of these trends will be completely relevant in every situation. However, it is important to bear all three in mind when considering the fiscal and economic health of any community.

Local Issues and Concerns

Ever since the devastating flood of 1955, the Town of Winchester has struggled with the question of how to encourage the revitalization of downtown Winsted. The flood devastated the downtown and led to the razing of most buildings on the South Side of Main Street, the channelization of the Mad River, and the widening of Main Street so that it is a four-lane state highway, which encourages motorists to pass through town rather than stop. Because of the way it was rebuilt after the flood, downtown's character is different than it used to be and is hampered by the two-mile length of Main Street, which makes it difficult to focus development activity. Although most storefronts are successfully leased, downtown does not contain the variety of business establishments required to be a highly successful business district. In addition, empty mill buildings on the south side of the river harm Winsted's visual character and its ability to return to prosperity. As a result, downtown Winsted does not play the same central role in the region's economy that it once did.

Yet downtown Winsted has many great assets. The downtown inventory of buildings is very strong, especially on the north side of Main Street. The fact that few vacancies exist along Main Street is also a good sign. The mill buildings have great character and in some cases house interesting business enterprises. Though located at the far eastern end of Main Street, Northwestern Connecticut Community College (NCCC) provides a strong educational anchor that most downtowns do not have. The emergence of Whiting Mills has brought artisan energy to the area.

Based on both these challenges and assets, the Smart Growth America staff and the participants in the workshop identified six areas of focus. These are:

1. Main Street

Once the lifeblood of downtown Winsted, Main Street now sends a mixed message to travelers. On the one hand, the historic buildings, shops, and restaurants on the north side of Main Street indicate that downtown is a good place for a motorist to stop and spend money. On the other hand, the four-lane state highway configuration, speed limit, and signage, the dearth of pedestrian crossings, and the lack of buildings or anything else at a pedestrian scale on the south side of the street suggest that Main Street is a thruway to be traversed quickly en route to somewhere else. As a result, Main Street – the most important street in the community – does not create a sense of place or lend itself to be the heart of the community.

2. Downtown Marketing

Although downtown Winsted's retail space has few vacancies and a Merchants Association exists, downtown businesses do not always work together in marketing the downtown as a place to shop, as

business communities do in most successful downtowns. The creation of a downtown marketing/management entity and joint marketing efforts are often keys to the overall success of a downtown because they help establish downtown as a safe and desirable destination.

3. Town Zoning

The Town of Winsted's zoning ordinance has not been revised for many decades. The town's archaic zoning makes it difficult to plan and develop new buildings or to renovate old buildings for new uses.

4. Northwestern Connecticut Community College

Downtown Winsted is extremely fortunate to host Northwest Connecticut Community College, which is located in handsome buildings on the eastern end of the downtown. This regional institution provides many important educational services for the Northwest Connecticut region and, just as important, provides a significant student and employment base in downtown Winsted. These employees and students could be better connected to downtown Winsted and its businesses.

5. Arts & Culture

The success of Whiting Mills and the robust nature of Northwest Connecticut Community College's art program suggest that the arts can play an important role in stabilizing and revitalizing downtown Winsted. Arts activities are often compatible with the reuse of older buildings and can attract people to downtowns and formerly industrial districts who would not otherwise go to those locations.

6. Funding

The Town of Winchester has few resources available to pursue ambitious goals for downtown Winsted. The town has minimal administrative staff and no staff planners. The town's Economic Development Commission, for example, has a budget of only \$700 per year.

Action Steps

With these major issues in mind, workshop participants discussed possible action steps that the township and other institutions in Winsted could take to facilitate further revitalization of the downtown. As with the issues and concerns, these action steps fell into six categories:

1. Main Street/Complete Streets

Main Street is a prime candidate for reconstruction and reconfiguration based upon Complete Streets principles, especially given the fact that Connecticut recently adopted a promising Complete Streets law. The term "Complete Streets" refers to a street that is designed for all users, including motorists, pedestrians, bicyclists, public transit riders and others. Given the relatively low traffic volumes on Main Street, the street is a good candidate for a "road diet:" narrowing, traffic calming, provision of high quality bicycle and pedestrian facilities, etc., even though it is a state highway. Such a change in the roadway would help establish Downtown Winsted as a destination, rather than simply a location to be driven through at high speed on the way to somewhere else.

State funding for Complete Streets is still in its infancy, but the Town of Winchester can take several steps to position Winsted as a candidate for investment. Three actions in particular would help this positioning.

- *Promote Winsted as a statewide pilot for implementing Complete Streets principles.*
- *Find a “champion” for Main Street at CTDOT, in the State Legislature or in Gov. Malloy’s office.*
- *Host a meeting of the Connecticut Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Board.*

2. Downtown management/marketing

As stated above, successful downtowns typically engage in coordinated marketing and management efforts in order to create a consistent brand, increase awareness of the downtown within the region, and create a “clean and safe” environment. The following action items hold the potential to help the downtown improve management and marketing.

- *Build on the current Merchants Association to create a modestly funded joint marketing effort.*
- *Pursue the creation of a business improvement district (BID) for downtown, which would provide funding for marketing and management. Such a BID would most likely involve an assessment of downtown property owners – a district typically known as a property-based improvement district, or PBID.*
- *Identify and pursue resources available through the Main Street programs of both the State of Connecticut and the National Trust for Historic Preservation – for example, funding through the Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP), which provides grants to improve property owned by towns in small downtowns.*

3. Town Zoning

The Town of Winchester’s zoning code is antiquated and difficult to use, but the Town does not have the financial resources to undertake a comprehensive revision. Given this lack of financial resources, the Town can take three steps to improve the zoning situation.

- *Adopt “planned development” zoning immediately.* Planned development zoning ordinances are simple to write and provide great flexibility to the Town in negotiating zoning conditions and requirements on specific development projects or building reuse efforts of importance to the Town. As this “flexibility” comes at the expense of uncertainty as to the character of future development and additional staff and elected official involvement in each development review, planned development zoning is recommended as an interim measure.
- *Consider “borrowing” another town’s updated code.* Winchester’s zoning code is so antiquated that it may be better to simply adopt an updated code from another Connecticut town with minimal

revision or effort.

- *Enlist graduate student assistance.* Many graduate schools of urban planning seek “clients” to provide their students with practical opportunities. The Town should contact nearby planning schools and arrange for a student project to rewrite critical sections of the zoning code. Although Connecticut has no accredited schools of planning, University of Massachusetts, Amherst and SUNY Albany both have accredited schools, while New York and Boston are especially rich with such schools.

4. Northwest Connecticut Community College

Northwest Connecticut Community College is a tremendous asset to Winsted and can play an important role in two ways: as an anchor institution for the downtown and as a partner in providing workforce training for local employers.

- *Assess NCCC’s role in the downtown’s economy.* Like most community college, NCCC’s student body is made up primarily of commuters. However, there may be a demand among the student population (and employees) to live close to the campus. In addition, students may also provide downtown businesses with a customer base. The Town should work with NCCC to create an online survey of students and employees to determine the market for both residences and retail services in the downtown. Discount coupons for downtown businesses could be used as an enticement to fill out the survey.
- *Strengthen physical connections to the rest of downtown.* Today it is much easier to cross the highway from NCCC to McDonalds than it is to cross the park to the center of downtown. The Town should strengthen pedestrian connections and wayfinding and maintain pedestrian connections year round.
- *Linking NCCC to local employers.* Community colleges such as NCCC across the nation have been responsive in assisting local employers with their workforce training needs. To help grow local businesses and provide a skilled workforce, the Town of Winchester should work with NCCC to provide training programs for the specific needs of the area’s employers. Downtown Winsted and the vicinity around it still contain many manufacturing businesses in need of skilled employees. The Town should connect these business owners to NCCC to identify training opportunities specifically for these businesses.

5. Arts & Culture

Downtown revitalization often begins with the arts. Downtown Winsted already has a strong arts base, thanks to the success of Whiting Mills. The Town should build on this success by taking further steps to encourage arts in the downtown. These steps include:

- *Identify a new space downtown for the NCCC student art gallery*, now that the retail space in Whiting Mills is no longer available. This gallery could be permanently placed or it could rotate among a variety of spaces.
- *Create a signature arts event*, such as an “art walk,” that would simultaneously feature student/local artworks and downtown businesses.
- *Identify a location for artist live/work studios*. Whiting Mills is very successful, providing studio and retail space as well as living space. The Town should identify a preferred location, perhaps an old mill building, for artist live/work studios; and work with the property owner to identify grants and expertise to move such a project forward.

6. Funding and Resources

Funding for major community initiatives remains an enormous challenge in the Town of Winchester. The Town itself has few financial resources and a very small staff, though the Town Manager does an excellent job of identifying and pursuing grant opportunities. Nevertheless, the Town can pursue several action steps to increase available funding and resources:

- *Create a community volunteer goal*. Active volunteers can help bridge the funding gap by providing time, energy, and expertise. The Town should set a goal for volunteer hours devoted to the betterment of downtown; challenge businesses and active downtown citizens to contribute to the goal, and measure progress toward that goal.
- *Create a microinvestment and microphilanthropy fund*. Major community initiatives often need relatively small amounts of money – a few hundred dollars or a few thousand dollars – to get off the ground. The Town should work with active downtown citizens and groups to create a microinvestment or microphilanthropy fund for downtown, allowing citizens to contribute small amounts of money to potentially major initiatives.
- *Pursue the creation of a tax-increment financing (TIF) district* under Connecticut law in order to generate additional funds for downtown revitalization. Most successful downtowns use TIF, but downtown Winsted does not have a TIF District.

Conclusion

The Town of Winchester has struggled for decades with the aftermath of the 1955 floods and the resulting changes to downtown Winsted. The downtown will probably never play precisely the same role it played early in the 20th Century, but it can play an important role in the social and economic life of Northwest Connecticut if its status as a unique destination and a community with character can be reinforced.

Progress has been made in recent years, though a lack of financial resources and the unintended consequences of highway “improvements” have hampered that progress. Some of the ideas presented in this memo are ambitious. But if the actions outlined in this memo are taken, the Town can make major

strides toward reviving downtown Winsted and improving the economic and fiscal health of the entire region.