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To: Metuchen Downtown Alliance Board of Directors and Isaac Kremer

From: Donna Ann Harris, Heritage Consulting Inc.

Copy: Jef Buehler, State Director Main Street New Jersey and
Improvement District Programs

Subject: Observations and Recommendations about SWOT exercise in Metuchen

The Metuchen Downtown Alliance is embarking on its first five year Strategic Plan to identify the preferred future for its downtown district. The SWOT workshop is the first step in a four step process to gather information from residents, consumers, property owners and other stakeholders to begin to take steps towards a brighter future.

Donna Ann Harris of Heritage Consulting Inc. is under contract with Main Street New Jersey to provide Organizational Sustainability services. She facilitated a Strengths, Weaknesses, Threats and Opportunities (SWOT) workshop held on the evening of November 14, 2016 at the Metuchen Senior Center.

After review of the raw notes from the SWOT exercise, we are making the following observations and some recommendations to solve some short-term concerns discussed during the workshop. Jef Buehler, State Director of Main Street New Jersey and Improvement District Programs has reviewed all of the meeting notes and this memo and made additions and refinements.

Most of the issues discussed at the SWOT cannot be solved by the Metuchen Downtown Alliance alone. The first part of this memo identifies opportunities where direct action by the MDA Board, teams and volunteers can solve problems in the near term. At the end of the memo, we offer a summary of the major issues discussed during the SWOT where the MDA Board can influence, but not control the outcome.

We hope these observations and recommendations are useful and feed into the larger effort to identify a handful of strategic priorities for the organization's long-term future as part of the Strategic Planning process.

Organizational issues (internal)

Organization Team

Metuchen Downtown Alliance Board, Staff, and Funding

Observations

- The Metuchen Downtown Alliance is a newly formed organization that uses the Main Street Four Point Approach™ as an organizing mechanism and a locally enacted Special Improvement District as a tool to fund the organization's operations. The Borough of Metuchen also provides funds for general operating support.
- The diverse membership of the MDA board was highly praised.
- There were several highly complementary comments about Isaac Kremer. It is gratifying that both Board and Staff are appreciated by SWOT attendees.
- Bobbie Theivakumaran, Co-chair of the Promotion Team was also praised for her diligence in providing a high quality social media presence for the organization through Facebook, traditional press releases and the Metuchen Downtown app.

Recommendations

- The Strategic Plan, when complete in six months, will provide a revised mission statement, vision statement, and a handful of strategic priorities rooted in the economics of the downtown district. The Team projects chosen will reinforce the current market conditions of Metuchen and take into account the new residents who will be moving in downtown in several new developments now under construction.
- While there appears to be an adequate budget for now, there were several comments about whether there was enough money to accomplish the ambitious agenda ahead.
- Other sources of funding such as sponsorships, earned income, grants, and community "membership" must be explored in the second year to ensure a diverse revenue stream.
- Isaac is the only staff member and he works full time. Additional part-time staff, interns, and/or work study students will be needed, along with other partnerships with schools, and other entities to provide staffing for a growing roster of projects downtown.
- Board members need to be trained on their roles and responsibilities very soon, so that the organization can start strong.
- Team chairs/co-chairs and volunteers need training on developing and completing task based work plans for all projects. Integrate work plans into volunteer recruitment, Team and Board meetings, its budgeting process, and ED/staff activities.

- The MDA Board and staff are just at the start of their Main Street journey. All need to be clear about the organization's initial priorities and communicate them relentlessly to prevent or lessen any unrealistic expectations of stakeholders. It is far better to under-promise and over-deliver in the first few years of Main Street work.
- MDA must focus on working and partnering with those who see downtown's current and potential value and those who want to be part of the solution. While you do need to hear and respond to nay-sayers, prioritize your time and resources into working with those who wish to work with you.

Volunteers

Observations

- There is a small group of dedicated volunteers who have worked hard for the last two years to establish the Metuchen Downtown Alliance organization and to pass the SID. This is an extraordinary feat. It is clear that virtually everyone still gets along.
- There was an upbeat attitude about the current volunteers and their diversity.

Recommendations

- The volunteer corps needs to grow, quickly, in order to implement early action Team activities. We are delighted that several teams have Co-chairs, which helps the Team leadership balance the work load.
- Begin recruiting interns and work study students to help in the office as needed.
- Additional training may be needed about current volunteer trends, and useful recruitment techniques.
- Make project workplans the MDA standard moving forward. Ensure that for a project to be approved by the Board it must have a workplan.
- Use your workplans as a direct channel to volunteer recruitment and management by creating task-based job opportunities and promoting them using a system such as signupgenius.com – this will save time and effort and reach volunteers where there are often at (online!)
- We highly recommend creating short volunteer job descriptions for skilled positions you wish to fill (such as: photographer, graphic designer, small business specialist, architects, contractors, visual merchandisers etc.) Post a few of these job descriptions on your Facebook page regularly and direct the volunteer to contact the Team chair for an assignment.

Promotion Team

Promotional Events and Activities

Observations

- Both the MDA and the Metuchen Chamber of Commerce produce downtown events.

Recommendations

- Coordination among and between the MDA and the Chamber staff and boards is essential to prevent overlap and redundant programming.
- There is a need for a master calendar for downtown events no matter the organizer.
- There was no clear understanding of the purpose of and difference between special events and retail events by SWOT attendees. The Promotion Team may need training about these.
- There were many suggestions for new events and festivals. We recommend that the MDA focus on retail events, designed to ring cash registers in local businesses that day.
- The upcoming online Consumer and Stakeholder Survey will help identify the current shoppers in the downtown and their demographics. This information can be used to sharpen the focus of events and reinforce the marketing to the key groups of shoppers in the area.
- MDA will need to ensure that all events and marketing it runs are in full synchronization with its brand and vision. To that end, MDA should consider using the MSNJ Promotion Evaluation Matrix. Please reach out to MSNJ for assistance in using this tool to help you analyze your events and promotions based on outcomes and resource management.

Communications and Marketing

Observations

- The social media presence of the MDA, especially Facebook and the app were highly praised. There is a local e-newsletter.
- There is a critical mass of positive attitude among public and private stakeholders about the downtown.
- As with any place, there are naysayers and CAVE people (Citizens Against Virtually Everything.) Fortunately they are in the minority in Metuchen, however vocal they may be.

Recommendations

- The Online Consumer and Stakeholder Survey will include questions about where current shoppers get their news about downtown which will be helpful for retailers for their own ad buys.
- MDA should aggressively gather email addresses to bolster its mailing list.
- Positive comments should be quoted wherever possible, using stakeholders own words (and photos) in traditional and social media.
- Particularly on social media, it is important to respond with facts, potential, and positivity – this takes ongoing effort, but will keep the majority of people on your side. Twenty percent of the people, businesses, and others may never buy in. Hear their concerns, but spend your time and effort working with the 80% who will or may be part of the solution.

Design Team

Downtown appearance

Observations

- The physical realm of downtown was a major concern. There were complaints about both the public and private sector spaces. Downtown storefronts, building maintenance and streetscape need improvement.
- Downtown has many fine assets and amenities such as the train station, Forum Theater, Library, Borough Hall, Post Office, and a number of commuter parking lots.
- Downtown Metuchen has a compact and walkable downtown; however, the shopping district is disjointed to some extent. There are residential buildings and office uses intermixed with shops and restaurants. There are small pockets of stores off the beaten path. Large commuter parking lots also break up the flow of downtown.
- The condition of downtown sidewalks received numerous complaints.
- There is a desire for more downtown landscaping including more trees, flowers, benches and other public amenities
- Downtown Metuchen exudes authenticity of place and history; MDA must be vigilant to preserve, restore, and promote it.
- Downtown is not currently a historic district, but there are a considerable number of high quality late 19th and early 20th century buildings that are worthy of preservation.

Recommendations

- The Design Team should consider creating incentives to encourage quality storefront, sign and awning projects. Ideally, this should be a local matching grant program.
- MDA will have to create Design Guidelines in order to implement any matching grant program. Get advice and samples of design guidelines from MSNJ.
- The MDA should be involved in programming the new Woodmont plaza.
- Work with the Borough to identify how to address sidewalk complaints.
- There is a desire to create a more formal arts district, placing more public art and creating murals in downtown, a great opportunity for partnership with existing organizations.
- MDA should work with the Borough to ban all tinted glass from storefronts moving forward to ensure that the district's businesses appear open and active at all times of the day.
- Work with the Design Team, Historic Preservation Committee, and area experts to identify which buildings merit listing on the National Register of Historic Places and discuss this honorary designation with these property owners. Explain how National Register listing is honorary and does not place restrictions on what owners may do with their property.

External issues that MDA can influence, but not completely control

Economic Vitality Team

Business mix and the business climate in Metuchen

Observations

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- There was general optimism about downtown, the area's market potential and Metuchen's economy.
- Downtown does have some destination businesses now, a variety of restaurants at various price points, a wealth of convenience businesses and a large number of professional service business.
- The Saturday farmers market is popular with SWOT participants.
- Many SWOT participants believe the rents are too high in downtown.
- There is a concern that there is a high turnover of businesses in the district, resulting in too many vacancies.
- South Main Street business owners feel ignored.

Recommendations

- The current business mix needs study and attention. SWOT attendees noted that there are too many convenience type retail stores (dry cleaners were mentioned) and professional offices where retail shops should be.
- We expect that business recruitment will be driven by the economic forces tied to the incoming retail and residential anchors. MDA must work with property owners to help them make good strategic leasing decisions based on data from the Market Analysis and Online Survey.
- Knitting the entire district together as a destination should be an immediate organizational priority, but note that achieving that goal will occur in phases over time.
- Some participants saw a need to address store hours, to encourage retailers to be open in the early evenings and on both weekend days as a convenience for customers.

Parking, Bikes, Pedestrian Safety and Traffic

Observations

- It was uniformly acknowledgement that the downtown has a parking management problem as well as serious traffic congestion.
- There were some concerns about pedestrian safety downtown, and dark spots; there is no handicapped parking anywhere, no handicapped accessible crosswalks, no bike lanes, no designated downtown employee parking lot, or smart meters that take credit cards.

Recommendations

- Solving the variety of parking problems in downtown Metuchen will take a sustained effort over many years with your partners, including the Borough's elected and appointed officials.
- MDA's Parking Team would be wise to work with the Borough's planners to review all the existing downtown parking plans, pedestrian safety and traffic studies to understand the complexity of the matter. This will help to prioritize the Team's work in conjunction with the Borough. Agree on roles and priorities together and the Team can develop work plans for projects in 2017.
- Pick some projects that can be easily solved first, like more way-finding signage or handicapped parking for example, and publicize every win, no matter how small.

- Begin planning for longer term projects with the Borough to address the many pedestrian, bike and car circulation problems.
- Work with the Borough to identify grant funds for handicapped crosswalks, smart meters, or other early action projects. Begin planning for longer term projects to address the many pedestrian, bike and car circulation problems.
- Do not be discouraged about the complexity of the parking, traffic and safety issues downtown. Agree on early action items with the Borough, and make progress. Main Street is a long-term effort to make comprehensive improvements, though is incremental in approach requiring taking one step at a time.
- MDA and the Borough may wish to consider applying for the Downtown Business Improvement Zone Loan Fund for wayfinding, sidewalk and pedestrian streetscape improvements in 2017. Contact MSNJ for more information about this program.

Borough Government, Regulation and Ordinances

Observations

- MDA has a good, ongoing relationship with the Borough. Four Council members participated in the SWOT.

Recommendation

- MDA should continue to build on this partnership with its Main Street Minute at monthly Council meetings and by working with the Borough to make Metuchen as business-friendly as possible.
- There were complaints about how difficult it is to get permits, zoning changes and approvals from Borough Hall.