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Metuchen Shopper Survey Findings Report Executive Summary

The Metuchen Downtown Alliance (MDA) sought consumer feedback about its operation and downtown commercial district as part of a Strategic Planning process. The purpose of the survey was to learn about downtown consumer preferences including what stores, restaurants, and businesses would make downtown Metuchen more appealing for shoppers.

Donna Ann Harris of Heritage Consulting Inc. worked with Isaac Kremer, Executive Director of MDA, to create a survey that provided enough detailed consumer insights to make recommendations about future MDA activities. The sixty (60) attendees at the November 2016 SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis workshop identified their major concerns which were then tested with a broader segment of the public through the shopper survey. The survey had 23 questions with several text boxes for write-in comments. The Metuchen Shopper Survey was open for three weeks from December 6, 2016 to January 2, 2017. The timely publicity generated an impressive 426 completed responses, a “statistically significant sample size” producing a ninety-five percent (95%) level of confidence such that the results of these survey are representative of the whole population of the Borough of Metuchen.

Top priorities for downtown

There are ten (10) top priority projects that are most important to shoppers, based on survey responses.

The MDA, working through its Board and Teams, should take the lead on the following top priority projects.

- Reduce the number of vacancies in the downtown.
- Help existing downtown businesses to increase their revenue and profitability.
- Get more destination businesses to locate here.
- Plan new events to bring people to the downtown to shop or dine.
- Encourage shop owners to coordinate one night on which they are all open past 6 p.m.

Half of the top ten projects must be addressed jointly by the Borough of Metuchen, the Parking Authority, and the MDA in a spirit of a true public private partnership that is encouraged by the Main Street Four Point Approach.™

- Light up the dark locations in downtown.

- Fix the broken sidewalks throughout downtown.
- Create an incentive program to encourage property owners to restore storefronts, place better looking signs and awnings.
- Create a free parking lot for Saturday shoppers.
- Improve pedestrian safety downtown.

Survey respondents overwhelmingly believe that the downtown is clean and safe. Respondents painted the following picture of downtown with their write in comments: parking is difficult, parking enforcement is lopsided, on-street parking is highly regarded (but often not available), pedestrians feel unsafe crossing streets and traffic circulation is both chaotic and potentially dangerous. Current parking and traffic conditions within the downtown not only inhibit the current functions of businesses but may prevent possible growth if left unresolved.

Survey participants want more retail options in addition to all the twenty-six (26) current dining establishments. Shoppers want expanded business hours and a mix of independent stores, chains, and franchises to meet their needs. There were sixty-four (64) direct requests for chain restaurants and sixty-seven (67) direct requests for name brand retailers.

When asked why shoppers did not visit downtown more often, the top five comments were:

- Too few stores or shops that interest me (61%, 259),
- Selection or quality of the merchandise in stores does not interest me (46%, 196),
- No anchor store, destination business, or performing arts venue downtown (37%, 158),
- Too much traffic congestion along Main Street (32%, 138),
- On-street parking is always full when I come to downtown (31%, 133).

Restaurants and dining

The restaurants that local shoppers most want to see in downtown are:

- Ethnic Restaurants (170); Indian (29) and Mexican (7) were top responses
- Traditional Restaurants (139); Burgers (39), Seafood (13), Steakhouse (11)
- Chain/Franchise/Specified Restaurants (64); Chipotle (11) and Starbucks (11)
- Heathy and/or Light Eating Restaurants (43),
- Casual and/or Convenience Restaurants (32).

Retail business

Retail businesses that survey participants wanted to see most in downtown were:

- Clothing, Shoes, and Accessories (121); general clothing store (23), shoe store (19),
- Home, Durable Goods, and Hardware (67); hardware store (20), home goods (5),
- Name Brand / Retail Chains (61), Trader Joes (6),
- Food Products / Grocery (49).

Specific retail stores, merchandise, or service businesses that survey participants most want are:

- Arts and Crafts (52%),
- Plants, Nursery and Gardening Supplies (52%) Book store, new or used (48%),
- Home Furnishings and Accessories (46%), and
- Card and Gift Store (45%).

Entertainment, club, arts venues

The most requested entertainment, club, and arts venue establishments are:

- Bars, Pubs, and Drinking Establishments (64); a jazz club (4),
- Live Performing Arts Venues (64); comedy club (10),
- Movies and Film (62); movie theater (30),
- Businesses, Art Classes, and Activities (38),
- Renovate Existing Entertainment Assets (37),

Metuchen downtown events

Eighty-three percent (83%) of Metuchen shoppers enjoy attending events downtown, and the highest rated events are:

- Metuchen Farmers Market,
- June Bug Arts Fest,
- Country Fair,
- Restaurant Week,
- Memorial Day Ceremony and Parade,
- Small Business Saturday.

The Metuchen Farmers Market is a reoccurring, seasonal Saturday event and a foot traffic generator. One time special events like June Bug Arts Fest, Country Fair and the Memorial Day Ceremony and Parade are an important component for any downtown promotion effort as they are designed to acquaint people with the downtown so they will come back later to shop. Restaurant Week and Small Business Saturday are the retail events, designed to “ring cash registers that day.”

Downtown spending

The most common sum spent by a shopper patronizing dining and drinking establishments is just over \$50 during a typical visit.

- Eleven percent (11%) spend less than \$20 at dining/drinking places during a typical visit.
- A third (33%) spend between \$20 and \$49 during a typical visit.
- Nearly a third (31%) spend between \$50 and \$79 during a typical visit.
- Twelve percent (12%) spend more than \$80 during a typical visit.

The most common sum spent by a visitor patronizing retail stores and shops is just over \$20 during a typical visit.

- Almost a third (31%) spend less than \$20 at a shop on a typical visit to a shop.
- Just over a third (35%) spend between \$20 and \$49 in a downtown shop.
- Nine percent (9%) spend between \$50 and \$79 during a typical visit to a shop
- Only five percent (5%) spend more than \$80 during a typical visit to a downtown store.

Retail spending is far lower than restaurant spending and may indicate that the current retail mix in Metuchen may not meet the needs of current shoppers, as they are spending money in shops elsewhere.

Recommended early action items

We recommend that the MDA make progress on the following activities in the next two years.

1. The MDA must continue to work closely with both the borough and Parking Authority to address survey participant's requests for improvement to pedestrian lighting and safety, cracked sidewalks, parking lot management, parking enforcement, and traffic congestion.
2. MDA Economic Vitality team should work with property owners to reduce the number of vacancies and connect business owners with technical assistance providers to increase downtown businesses' revenue and profitability.
3. The new Retail Market Analysis information should be used by the Economic Vitality Team to change the business mix in the downtown, recruit more destination or anchor businesses, and use the suggestions for new retail, restaurants, and entertainment options discussed in this report.
4. New retail events that "ring cash registers that day" should be the focus of the Promotion Team rather than creating new special events, as there seem to be enough already.
5. The Organization Team should continue its work to recruit volunteers, grow the email list, secure sponsorships for organization-wide activities, and communicate about the MDA's work using the most effective traditional and new media tools identified in this report.
6. The Promotion Team can help all downtown stakeholders by creating and promoting a unified special event calendar.
7. Shop owners should be encouraged to coordinate one night each week when they are all open past 6 p.m. to meet the needs of customers.
8. To encourage quality façade improvements and better signs and awnings, the Design Team should work with the borough to create a matching storefront improvement grant program. The Design Team will need to create Design Guidelines in advance of implementing such a program.
9. The Design Team should focus on placemaking activities to beautify downtown by adding flowers, benches, and trees along with holiday lighting and other amenities over the next few years.
10. The borough should continue current downtown cleanliness and safety efforts, as they are highly effective.

How to use this report

The survey findings provide fresh information from and about current shoppers and should be considered seriously as high quality intelligence to make decisions about downtown's future.

The survey findings report is only helpful if it is employed by the MDA and local merchants to make changes in current marketing, business recruitment and retention, and advertising practices. We encourage the MDA to circulate this report widely and explain its significance to retailers and restaurateurs in the district.