

October 16, 2008

To: The Citizens of South Berwick
Re: Summary of opinion leader interviews
From: Frank O'Hara



Between August and October, 2008, eight South Berwick volunteers interviewed 27 different opinion leaders in the community about their

views about South Berwick's future and economic development. This memo provides a summary of their comments. These comments will be used by the Economic Development Committee, in consultation with the public, to develop economic goals.

Note on opinion leader surveying

Opinion leader surveying is a method for gaining the pulse of a community. It provides greater breadth and depth of community views than traditional survey techniques, and when it is conducted by citizen volunteers as was done in this case, at a much lower cost. This is not a "poll" – the reader can't add up all the people who support one action or another, and generalize that figure to the town as a whole. But the reader can be confident that the responses cover most of the opinions held by residents within the community.

Thanks to Mimi Demers, Sue Pullar, Katherine Wolfe, Clifford Cleary, Mike Lassel, John Rudolph, Douglas Leteillier, and Brad Christo, for conducting the interviews and entering the data into the survey system.

Here are the questions that were asked, and the major themes from the responders.

Question 1: What are the major challenges you see facing South Berwick in the next 5 years?

Keeping property taxes affordable was the major concern among respondents. To this end, many supported business development, or actions to control costs in town and school government.

Traffic congestion, especially in downtown, was the second challenge mentioned.

Other challenges mentioned included maintaining rural character, good education quality, and achieving energy independence.

Question 2: In broad terms, what do you think the town government in South Berwick should be doing to address these issues?

Many respondents mentioned a need for planning – for economic development, for energy independence, for transportation, for land use and zoning.

In preparing such plans, respondents emphasized the need for a sound decision-making process – for listening to everyone, for developing a consensus, for transparency in decision-making, for seeing the whole picture when deciding on individual items, for civic leadership.

A wide range of specific actions were suggested: traffic changes (road bypass or one-way loops downtown), municipal cost-cutting, regionalizing or consolidating services, researching what other towns are doing, setting up a tax increment financing district to attract business, eliminating parking regulations in the downtown, getting grants, educating the citizenry and elected officials.

Question 3: Is economic development – defined as helping existing businesses to grow and expand, and attracting new businesses to move into the community – an important priority for the community? Why or why not?

The overwhelming answer here is yes. But the motivations for this are varied:

- reduce residential property taxes;
- create new jobs and economic opportunities for residents;
- make the community desirable for people to come live, shop, and work; and
- as part of a holistic effort to create a sustainable community -- energy-efficient, environmentally and economically sound.

A few of the respondents were skeptical, again for a variety of reasons:

- Because there’s no way for the Town to compete with New Hampshire;
- Because it would endanger the small-town quality of life;
- Because the Town’s strength is its residential neighborhoods, and this should be what the future community is about.

Question 4: Here are some reasons for economic development. Which matter the most to you?

The answers to this question followed the lines described above. Easing the tax burden is the first reason, but creating an innovative and interesting community is also on the agenda.

Here are some reasons for economic development. Which matter the most to you?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
a) To keep tax rates down?	64%	16
b) To provide job opportunities for young people?	36%	9
c) To have a lively and interesting downtown?	44%	11
d) To encourage economic innovation and prosperity?	56%	14
e) Other?	16%	4

Question 5: If you were to pick two or three ideal economic development projects for South Berwick, what might they be?

The list of ideas proposed was endless, among them being:

- Support downtown businesses
- Expand business in the Norton Street area
- Bring back “the point” – lower Main Street
- Professional/service/hi-tech
- Software, biotech
- Light manufacturing
- A new library downtown
- A town common in downtown
- An alternative energy industry that would design, manufacture, install solar, wind and geothermal energy systems
- Elderly, over 55 housing
- Small steel buildings with light industrial units or storage
- Medical
- Industrial park with contract zoning
- Extend sewer and water down 236
- Parking downtown
- Regional tourism marketing
- Foster more cultural and recreation events

Question 6: What should be the Town’s role in economic development? Should it participate financially in regional efforts to promote economic development? (why or why not?):

What should be the Town’s role in economic development? Should it (why or why not?):		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Market the community and/or region through brochures, web sites, etc.?	60.9%	14
Apply for grants to help businesses or business park developers who ask for it?	65.2%	15
Provide tax increment financing districts for businesses or business park developers that ask for it?	26.1%	6
Develop a town-owned business park through a combination of grants and town money?	17.4%	4
Develop a package of financial tools for businesses in South Berwick, such as revolving loan fund and TIF districts, as ways to encourage businesses to grow and expand?	52.2%	12
Participate financially in regional efforts to promote economic development?	47.8%	11
Other?	21.7%	5

Respondents generally felt that the Town should encourage economic development through marketing and applying for grants, but that it should not expose itself to risk by either owning a business park or directly subsidizing developers. While tax increment financing was not widely supported, several noted that they didn't understand how it works. Streamlining regulations, consolidating municipal services with neighbors, and promoting tourism were also mentioned.

Question 7: What is the easiest way for the Committee to communicate with you and other citizens going forward (i.e., mailing, website, post at transfer station, email, etc.)

Besides the items listed above, respondents also mentioned the 236 diner blog, the local Quamphegan newspaper, and continued face-to-face meeting discussions.

Question 8: Do you have any final comments or suggestions for the Economic Development Committee?

Most of the responses to this question had to do with communicating, listening, creating a consensus, keeping a sense of community, maintaining public support, proceeding carefully, and following through. But there were also several specific ideas, such as:

- Renovate downtown with underground utilities, refurbished store fronts, more retail;
- Lower water and sewer costs
- Pursue downtown and industrial zone improvements at the same time, using public/private partnerships