THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ELEMENT

Economic development is perhaps the most dynamic element that a community addresses in its Master Plan. Changing markets and fluctuations in development pressure create a situation in which it is difficult to be effective without dedicating significant resources toward acquiring ever-changing information. Changing regulations, property transfers, and new incentive programs from state and federal programs all come together in a volatile mix of public and private influences that requires constant attention if a community is truly going to direct economic activity.

Public perspectives on economic development issues are represented in the charts below. These were drawn from the Master Plan survey conducted as part of the formal public outreach portion of the Master Plan development process.

[INSERT GRAPHICS FOR QUESTIONS 2, 19, 20, AND 23 FROM THE SURVEY]

This chapter will focus on economic development in Seekonk and highlight some of the current formative issues for local economic development. At the end of the chapter, a list of recommended actions is provided.

Formative Issues and Goals

Sustaining Economic Development Efforts in the Town. Although the Town of Seekonk is successful on many levels in retaining a healthy business community, there is an overriding feeling among many residents and officials that Seekonk's approach to business development is more "reactive" than "proactive". In order to develop a "vision" for economic development in the Town, and to provide a roadmap for achieving that vision, a group needs to be formed that dedicates itself to these issues exclusively. Past Master Plans called for the formation of a local Chamber of Commerce and an Economic Advisory Committee to achieve this objective.

The Chamber of Commerce model would work well in Seekonk as these groups provide essential services to the business community including, but not limited to, outreach, training/education, marketing, and advocacy. Depending on their resources and staffing, a Chamber of Commerce can also form subcommittees to review important issues. For example, a committee could be formed to assess infrastructure needs in a particular area of the Town or perhaps to focus on emerging economic opportunities such as "green energy" research and development. However it is important to note that these groups are non-governmental and the Town's role in forming a Chamber of Commerce would not be a *leadership* role, but rather a *supporting* role. Resources for sustaining a Chamber of Commerce generally come exclusively from the dues charged to its members, so the business community needs to be organized around this issue in order for it to get off the ground. Strategies provided as part of the Master Plan therefore focus on the ways in which the Town can facilitate the formation of a Chamber of Commerce that would eventually emerge as a partner in economic development.

Economic Development and Fiscal Health. An important component of discussing economic objectives is the role of economic development in the Town's overall fiscal health. The term

"fiscal health" refers to the Town's ability to pay for the services it provides primarily to its residents, but also to business owners and visitors. Most residents are aware of some of the major services like public education, police and fire protection, and roadway maintenance. However, the list of services provided by typical suburban communities like Seekonk is much larger and includes services for seniors, review of development proposals, information exchange, and many other critical items. To fund these services, cities and towns rely primarily on levying property tax. Like many other communities, Seekonk applies a range of tax rates to properties based on the use (e.g., residential versus commercial) and the scale (e.g., different size commercial operations pay different rates.)

When discussing the quality of life experienced in the Town of Seekonk with its residents, it is not uncommon for them to mention the tax rate for residential property. At $11.39 per $1,000 of property value, the level of municipal service in the community is provided at a rate that is highly competitive in the region. At closer examination, it is interesting to examine how far the residential tax contribution goes in paying for these services. For example, as with other communities, the most costly service provided in the Town is the public school system. Recent communication with the Director of Finance suggests that, when dividing the total number of students into the full school budget, it costs the Town just over $13,000 per year to educate an individual student, a cost that is produced exclusively by residential development. Table X illustrates how this cost relates to the average residential tax bill in the community.

Table X. Comparing Average Residential Tax Bill to the Cost of Public Education

Assumed Enrollment in Seekonk Schools[1]	Number of Single Family Homes[2]	Average Number of Students per Single Family Home	Cost of Educating Each Student / Year	Cost per single family home / Year	Typical Single Family Home Annual Property Tax[2]	Deficit per Household Related to School Costs Alone per Year
2,050	4,723	0.43	$13,059	$5,668	$3,200	-$2,468

1. Source: Finance Office. Assumed number used by the Town to calculate cost for each student. Actual enrollment figures may be slightly higher or lower.
2. Source: Assessor's Office 2011.

What Table X above demonstrates is that when tax revenue and school expenses are averaged over the number of single family homes, each home produces a significant deficit. It is important to note that this example only accounts for costs related to the school system and not the myriad of other services provided by the Town including police and fire protection, roadway maintenance, permit review and others. The addition of these necessary services to the analysis above would only increase the deficit when comparing income from the residential property tax to the costs of municipal services.

This analysis is meant to underscore the importance of maintaining a healthy and diverse economic base as Seekonk continues to develop. Commercial property tax is the primary means through which Seekonk makes up for the deficits created by residential development, providing over one third of the property tax levy in the community. As the recession continues to subside and the housing market eventually recovers, the development of more homes in Seekonk will

add to the tax burden of existing and new residents. To safeguard the competitive residential tax rate as this occurs, Seekonk will need to protect its existing businesses and look for ways to expand that piece of the tax base concurrent with residential growth.

Retaining the Competitive Edge of Route 6. As illustrated in the fiscal discussion above, the viability of the Route 6 retail center is critical to the quality of life for residents in Seekonk. The businesses along the Route 6 retail corridor provide more than half of the commercial property tax contribution for the whole Town (personal communication, Seekonk Assessor). If these economic engines are not maintained, the economic support structure for Seekonk residential quality of life will be at risk. The Town relies on the corridor's vitality for services and tax revenues to the degree that this area represents Seekonk's "biggest investment". To protect that investment, Seekonk must see itself as a "business partner" with owners in this area while balancing the social and environmental impacts of high intensity development. Barriers that still exist relative to redevelopment in the Route area include continued impacts to the Runnins River, the difficulty associated with increasing the number of liquor licenses allocated to the Town, and the uncertainties associated with market conditions as the country struggles to emerge from a recession. To address environmental issues, the Town will need to identify infrastructure improvements that could help redevelopment occur while improving conditions in the Runnins River. With regard to liquor license issues, the Town will need to continue communication with the state to negotiate increases. Finally, with regard to market conditions, the Town must actively research how other big box retail centers continue to thrive by either strengthening the existing business model, or by incorporating new concepts.

Infrastructure that Supports Sustainable Economic Development. As Seekonk continues to grow, higher intensity development and environmental stress will continue to place infrastructure demands on the Town. In order to maintain the viability of commercial and industrial areas, and to ensure the health of water resources, the Town will need to consider seriously the significant investment in infrastructure. The largest investments would potentially be those related to stormwater and wastewater infrastructure. As a "Phase II" community, Seekonk will need to comply with the new National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits issued through the Commonwealth. The required improvements and monitoring may require significant investment over time. Although generally considered an "environmental issue", Phase II requirements have significant financial and economic ramifications and the Town will need to fully understand the scope of these requirements to properly budget. With regard to sewer, residents of the Town voted against the development of a sewer system for fear that it would encourage rapid development and erode community character. The side effect of this choice is that the lack of a sewer system presents problems for the construction of new retail, office, and especially industrial buildings.

Business Diversity and Local Service. In discussions at the public forum and with local officials, the need to examine proximity to basic services was an important issue. Differences between the "north" and "south" ends of the Town were highlighted in terms of basic services and there is concern that residents in the northern area of Seekonk are leaving town to purchase many day-to-day goods. Other discussions revolved around different retail areas such as Route 44 and Luther's Corners and the unique challenges facing each pocket of commercial activity including accessibility, character, identity, infrastructure, and general viability. The Town continues to

make significant efforts in examining these areas and, in the case of Luther's Corners, adopted regulations tailored to the needs of that district. With regard to Route 44, the Town recently finalized a study with the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD) that explores the future of these commercial areas and potential improvements. Seekonk will need to continually revisit the success and failures of these smaller districts to ensure that neighborhoods are adequately served and the overall business profile of the town remains diverse.

Commercial Development and Community Character. Residents and local officials in Seekonk almost universally describe the most valuable assets of the community in terms of "rural" or "New England" character. Although much of Seekonk is more suburban in density with some pockets of urbanization, this perception of a rural character speaks to certain design elements that should be carried over into commercial area development. Many of Seekonk's commercial strips have developed in a manner that is inconsistent with this sense of rural or traditional New England character. Street edges have not been maintained, and buffer strips are not used or effectively designed on portions of Route 44, Central Avenue, Route 6, and Route 114A. Unattractive development along some of Seekonk's most visible thoroughfares prevents the projection of a positive image for the community and for businesses.

Issues related to aesthetic design have a direct impact on economic development as the image of a particular development will contribute tangibly to the viability of the operation and patterns of development on adjacent properties. Over time, the development community has become much more comfortable with the concept of "design standards" within the development process and this tool can be applied with little difficulty to commercial enterprises that range in size from corner stores to big box giants. Seekonk should begin to examine the applicability of different design standards to individual districts and adjust local regulations accordingly.

Retaining Viable Industrial Development. As with many communities across the country, Seekonk is faced with the challenge of globalized markets coupled with effects of a significant economic recession. Industrial markets are difficult to maintain under these conditions and many districts throughout New England have been re-zoned for "lower hanging fruit" such as resort, retail, or mixed use. Unfortunately, there are some negative side effects to the loss of industry within a municipality. First, maintaining this sector adds to the diversity of a local economy and can contribute significantly to the generation of jobs. Second, industrial jobs generally pay what is considered as "good middle class" wages. These wages are generally much higher than those provided in service and retail and add an income bracket to the community that helps local business diversity. Discussions within the community during the outreach process demonstrate a strong commitment among residents to maintain and strengthen the industrial lands in Seekonk today. The Town will need to closely examine the challenges faced by industrial enterprise today and actively pursue solutions if local industrial use is to be maintained.

Effective Municipal Coordination. One recurring theme that emerged during stakeholder discussions was the issue of communication between different staff and departments at the municipal level. While this issue affects decision making for every element of the Master Plan, it has particular significance to Economic Development. With any organization, as the amount and level of responsibilities increase over time, members of municipal government will face

challenges related to coordinating their efforts and ensuring a basic level of awareness across all departments of important issues. Where casual encounters in the hallway may once have been sufficient for keeping everyone informed of different projects and issues, new reporting requirements, technologies, and initiatives create a need for more efficient means of sharing information. Seekonk is experiencing some of these growing pains and it is essential for the Town to work toward streamlining and enhancing communication. The ability to effectively prioritize investment through the Capital Improvements Program (CIP) or to coordinate permitting efforts on new projects requires well-designed systems for sharing information. These systems, in turn, will have a direct impact on Seekonk's ability to foster a sustainable local and regional economy.[1]

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

Objective ED-1: Create systems and tools for a structured economic development approach.

Actions:

a. Create outreach materials for local businesses describing the costs and benefits of having a local Chamber of Commerce.
b. Invite representatives from neighboring Chambers of Commerce to talk about their accomplishments to the Seekonk business community.
c. Create a municipal Economic Advisory Committee (EAC) to sustain economic development efforts from the Town and serve as a liaison to the Chamber of Commerce.
d. Have EDC members receive training in issues of economic development through the Massachusetts Economic Development Council (MEDC).
e. In cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce, develop a marketing strategy for Seekonk that includes highlights of business-friendly approaches within the community for commercial and industrial districts.
f. Maintain an inventory of vacant or underutilized commercial and industrial parcels that can be easily accessed by prospective investors.
g. Assess the feasibility of running a web-based municipal GIS that could display important economic development information.
h. Develop a business outreach program that includes critical information in a variety of media such as web-based material, e-blast notifications, mass mailings, workshops, etc.
i. Ensure that clear standards for parking, setbacks, allowable uses and other essential Zoning By-law elements will be adopted to address the unique purpose of each commercial and industrial district.
j. Continue to review regulatory standards that apply to transitional areas between commercial, industrial, and mixed-use zoning districts and adjoining residential neighborhoods and identify design and performance standards that will ensure compatibility between these uses across district lines.

Objective ED-2: Facilitate and require high quality design of commercial areas.

[1] The Services and Facilities Element of the Master Plan also addresses issues related to municipal investment and the CIP process.

Actions:

a. Develop design standards within the Zoning By-law tailored to different districts that will ensure a high quality of design in commercial development.
b. Incorporate adequate circulation for bicycles and pedestrians into commercial site design.
c. Create or distribute existing design manuals for the Planning and Zoning Boards as educational pieces to assist them with permit application review and allow them to easily identify design flaws.
d. Develop standardized approaches to impact analyses that may accompany permit submittals to ensure a predictable approach to items such as fiscal impact analysis, traffic impact analysis, etc.

Objective ED-3: Support neighborhood scale business and services.

Actions:

a. Identify a liaison within the EDC to the South Eastern Economic Development (SEED) agency in order to better connect Seekonk's small business community with technical and financial support.
b. Develop a circulation study for Luther's Corners to identify strategies for increasing access to local businesses.
c. Re-examine the Zoning By-law provisions that govern Baker's Corners to ensure this area can better serve residents in the "north end" of Seekonk with essential services.
d. Implement the strategies developed as part of the Route 44 Corridor Study (SRPEDD, 2011).
e. Continue to support home occupation business within designated zoning districts.

Objective ED-4: Maintain the viability of the Route 6 corridor.

Actions:

a. Present a written economic development strategy to the Commonwealth that would help to leverage additional liquor licenses in the Route 6 area.
b. Identify infrastructure improvements that could make redevelopment in the Route 6 corridor more streamlined.
c. Identify individual sites that are critical to the health of the Runnins River and other resources and create pre-development information packets for developers clearly outlining the performance standards associated with those sites.
d. Research other models of development that are compatible with "large pad" sites including, but not limited to, Mashpee Commons, South County Commons, Patriot Place, and Legacy Place.
e. Incorporate design standards tailored specifically to big box and strip retail to ensure that Seekonk receives the highest quality design from local, national, and international corporations.

Objective ED-5: Maintain the viability of existing industrial lands.

Actions:

a. Communicate directly with property/industry owners to identify challenges to re-occupation, expansion, or redevelopment in industrial districts.
b. Continue to assess the feasibility for other non-retail uses of industrial lands including, but not limited to, renewable energy facilities.
c. Support the development of an Industrial Subcommittee within the Chamber of Commerce.

Objective ED-6: Provide infrastructure that supports economic centers.

Actions:

a. Continue discussions with the City of Attleboro regarding the potential to append Seekonk to Attleboro's Economic Target Area (ETA) designation.
b. Identify areas within the community where the use of District Improvement Financing (DIF) could be used to leverage funding for necessary infrastructure upgrades.
c. Perform feasibility/growth management studies for installing a municipal sewer system that would be targeted to economic development areas within the community.
d. Continue to advocate for state-level transit/transportation improvements in designated economic development centers.

Objective ED-7: Maintain a housing stock suitable for a diverse workforce.

a. Have the Seekonk EDC identify a liaison to the Massachusetts Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation (CEDAC) to identify ways in which this organization can assist Seekonk with economic development and housing issues.
b. Monitor the range of housing values continually throughout the community in order to identify any demographic groups that do not have adequate access to quality housing.
c. Implement the strategies found in the Housing Element of the Master Plan.

Objective ED-8: AGRICULTURE?

a. Develop an inventory of farmland in the Town and prioritize farm viability efforts based on a structured assessment of potential development pressure, farm productivity, scenic and cultural value, and other factors.

Commentary: John, we generally like to have economic strategies for agriculture separate from the Land Use Element for those communities that show strong support for agriculture…which Seekonk certainly did through the survey. However, this is not an area that Seekonk appears to be very far along on from a policy standpoint. We want to explore this further with the community and discuss with you the possible outreach mechanisms and/or key stakeholders.