



## Bethlehem Forward: Comprehensive Plan Update

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### Large Business/Economic Development Focus Group Summary

Thursday, April 15, 2021 – 10:00AM via Zoom

**Goal/purpose:** To explore how Bethlehem can support existing and attract new businesses (non-retail/storefront) and advance economic development opportunities in the Town, which will guide recommendations for the Comprehensive Plan Update.

**Facilitators:** William Price, RLA – SWBR

**Town/Consultant representatives:** Rob Leslie, Director of Planning [rleslie@townofbethlehem.org](mailto:rleslie@townofbethlehem.org); Kevin Dwarka, Economic Development Consultant [kdwarka@kevindwarka.com](mailto:kdwarka@kevindwarka.com); David VanLuven, Supervisor

**Comprehensive Plan Update Committee Member:** Rad Andersen

#### What are top 2-3 things that concern you about your business?

- **Jim Marotta (American National Insurance-Farm Family, Route 9W):** Biggest issue is attracting and retaining talent. With Covid, we are now looking at attracting talent from rest of country. Insurance industry is heavily regulated. There are catastrophes that affect as well.
- **Gregg Biche(Quality Property Management, Delaware Ave.):** Work is not hard to get. But labor force is real challenge. And there is not an end to that in near sight.
- **Patrick Riegel (WJ Riegel Rail Solutions):** We are in industrial construction, supporting rail providers. Our single largest issue is attracting skilled labor. There is no shortage of work but we are limited in what we pursue given employment and training requirements. We are very regulated as well, and requirements discourage labor.
- **Casey Crowley (Owens Corning, Rt. 32/Feura Bush Road):** Labor is key piece for manufacturing. Talent is slow and hard to find. New regulations (paid sick leave) puts us in a bind. We are trying to build up skill level through apprenticeship programs but we are limited in number we can train while still hiring. State/Town provided job training grant. Second piece is utility-power supplies (interruptions from National Grid). These small blips have an impact.
- **Maurice O'Connell (CSX):** Our biggest interest is safety. Transport is heavily regulated by Surface Transportation Board (STB) and Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). We have large yard in Selkirk and automotive distribution center. Having the Town's cooperation has helped us attract customers. David has reached out to help us bring additional business.

- **Kurt Miles (CSX):** Our operation at Selkirk is mission critical. In 2017, CSX operated 12 pump yards. Now we have just 5. So Selkirk has become even more important and will get busier as times goes by – future is strong.

**What are the best aspects of where your business is located? What are drawbacks of your current locations?**

- **Patrick Jordan (Port of Albany):** We have river / road access. Port was built in perfect spot. But then everyone built around us. Led to complaints about traffic volumes and noise. Saying “we were here first” doesn’t work. Moving traffic fleets and road infrastructure is expensive (\$5 - \$10M). If we change 300ft of track, that’s a ½ million(\$). These are not small costs. So while we are well positioned as a hub (3 hours from major cities) and employ 2,000 people, getting to Port is not always easy for tenants. CDTA buses from South End of Albany or Bethlehem is limited. We have been trying to impress upon CDTA to improve access via bus routes, car pooling, that would get more workers direct into port.
- **Scott Sabatino (Price Chopper):** We have 2 facilities in Bethlehem (Slingerlands under construction as a Market 32) and Glenmont. One of our biggest complaints is that the Glenmont entrance is very difficult. We have been trying to get a traffic light to improve safety during peak times of getting in and out.
  - Robert: Roundabout construction will begin in May.
- **Patrick Jordan (Port of Albany):** Things like roundabouts work great. Municipalities around port are creating travel patterns that make it harder for Port Transport movements of goods on Rt32 or Rt9. There are chokepoints of getting on I-787 that we cannot handle anymore. We may need to turn down tenants. There was not collaboration with the adjoining municipality (Albany) I787 exit ramp about working with existing businesses. If we don’t resolve the transport issues, we could lose longshoreman and actual employers around the Port that need the port to move things through.
  - David – as part of roundabout design, we met with large truck drivers early on in the comprehensive planning process to make sure our systems work for everyone.
  - Robert – we accommodated the large trucks/ low flatbeds in the roundabout design by adjusting curb design.
- **Jody Monroe (Bethlehem Central School District):** We have created some traffic issues this past year with pick up and dropoff. We are fortunate in that we do get high quality candidates for teaching and administrative jobs. Volume applicants are lower. (e.g. elementary school teacher position 5 years ago would attract 1,000 applicants – today 200-300 applicants). There is a change in labor pool. But we still get qualified candidates. When we look at support staff, we are experiencing huge shortages of bus drivers. Lots of new requirements from State. We typically have over 90 drivers. We are now under 60. We have to rely on parents to bring kids to schools. We have challenges with other positions (aides). We struggle to get quality people who want to stay.

- **Judith Kehoe (Bethlehem Central School District):** We have increased our sidewalks to encourage students walking to school. Walkability is a plus.
- **Jim Marotta (American National Insurance-Farm Family):** Walkability is important to our employees. The addition of sidewalks and roundabout has been well received. We have had some incidents where we have had employees hit by cars, walking across Rt9W for lunch to Walmart or Applebee's. As we thinking about walkability, let's consider safety for employees, students, or residents using walk areas.

**What advice do you have for the Town / County wishing to attract new industry?**

- **Gregg Biche (Quality Property Management):** For companies seeking employees from outside the Town is availability of housing a concern?
- **Jim Marotta (American National Insurance):** We have young families who are attracted to schools but move to areas around Bethlehem due to availability and affordability of housing.
- **Scott Sabatino (Price Chopper):** I recently sold home in Glenmont after 25 years of Bethlehem. Prospective buyers decided to back out of deal and live on outskirts of Bethlehem because of the cost of living in Bethlehem with property taxes, price of housing. The market is hot right now.
- **Kurt Miles (CSX):** Provide listing of properties on website that County lists and shows availability, acreage, power, infrastructure. Work with brokers and CBRE. Selkirk is an obvious place to focus efforts given how many want to be around that railyard.
- **Carl Becker (Windsor Companies):** You could use more multi-family, especially our one product in the Hamlet development, the townhome rental rents to two type of tenants (young professionals and downsizers).
- **Gregg Biche (Quality Property Management):** the idea of first floor living is something we get on a regular basis. Many want to turn the living room into a bedroom space, and find space for bathroom. They want to age in their homes.

**Are there other business synergies you would like to see located nearby? (i.e. supply chain)**

- **Patrick Riegel (WJ Riegel Rail Solutions):** Customers who want rail access speak with Patrick who works with Kurt. We acquired property that was already well served by CSX – former Agway property. What we are looking to bring in transload projects (farm served, commodities) things that can go from rail to truck, a standard transload operation. Some that need short term storage – maybe lumber product.
  - Riegel Rail Solutions is located in the Selkirk area. We both from a construction standpoint, service the local industries, and also wear the hat for developer properties. We go right to Kurt with transload requests, can it be supported by CSX, how rail cars can come in/year and how many trucks can come off the road? With location in Selkirk there is potential for short-term, long-term storage – feeds into the Port access to the river. We

have been at our business serving rail customers for 40 years, but attempting to spearhead other business in South Bethlehem and continue to work with Kurt.

**Do you use local, county or state economic development programs?**

- **Kurt Miles (CSX):** We do work a lot with NYS Empire State Development – multimodal programs. Right now, we have been working with Patrick Riegel to access transload customers who do not have their own facility to offload – former Agway property. We have been working with Peter Frueh. That activity is created by proximity to Selkirk. We are hoping that some of the business can use some of the programs out there.

**What town, county or state regulations / policies could be modified to help your business?**

- **Patrick Riegel (WJ Riegel Rail Solutions):** On the existing property, because we are in the infancy of clean up and rehabbing track structure in this heavy industrial zone, we need to determine what products (like fertilizers, gas, hazmat) to determine what we can target at this issue. Can we serve gas? Propane? Conversation is still developing in terms of what we could be bringing here. This is what we could bring in the town of Bethlehem. Will meet with Town to determine what products can be brought in – nonhazardous materials. Aware of potential customers who want to move from current facility and be closer to railyards and markets they serve.
- **Patrick Jordan (Port of Albany):** For developers and the Port, having a clear path for development whether its actual or imagined. We need to know that we need to get through the process in a timely fashion (predictability). As long as that continues, road blocks are not going to be thrown up out of the blue. Developers need to know what to expect. Port had good experience with the Town – wind energy development site. Links to available sites that allow industrial development (similar to Kurt comment above), make the information available and work closely with applicant through the planning review process. Goal is to get trucks off the road and product/material onto rail or barge.
  - Dissuade truck traffic from using Corning Hill Road. River Road is preferred. Improving roads and rail within the Port over next few years to allow traffic to get right onto rail or highway.
- **Patrick Riegel (WJ Riegel Rail Solutions):** It will be important to capture the usage of business and properties in thinking about zoning along cargo corridors adjacent to railyards. There are previous farms converted to industrial uses (trucking companies). In 2005, our physical location along Route 396 was rezoned to a Rural Hamlet zone. This was in error and it's limited our expansion plans. Needs to be rezoned for our current business operations. Capture what the appropriate use of lands should be to support business.

**THANK YOU!!!**

**Ways to continue the conversation – let's keep it going!:**

- Website: [www.BethlehemForward.com](http://www.BethlehemForward.com)
- Social media: <https://www.facebook.com/BethlehemForward>,  
<https://www.instagram.com/bethlehemforward/>

- Email: [BethlehemForward@townofbethlehem.org](mailto:BethlehemForward@townofbethlehem.org)
- Rob Leslie- Phone: 518-439-4955 x 1157