



## Bethlehem Forward: Comprehensive Plan Update

[www.bethlehemforward.com](http://www.bethlehemforward.com)

### Local Business/Chamber Focus Group Summary

Thursday, April 15, 2021 – 8:30AM via Zoom

**Goal/purpose:** To explore how Bethlehem can support and encourage existing and new retail/storefront businesses in Town, which will guide recommendations for the Comprehensive Plan Update.

**Facilitators:** William Price, RLA – SWBR and Maureen McGuinness – Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce

**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:** Bill Ketzer

#### Why did you choose to locate your business in Bethlehem?

- **John McIntyre (Spotlight Newspapers, 341 Delaware Avenue, Delmar):** Been here since 1955. Had opportunity in early 2000s, as business shifted from Delmar to Colonie, we contemplated moving but decided to stay because of the uniqueness of Bethlehem and our time there. We choose to be here b/c of vibrant community.
- **Jim Giacone (My Place, 241 Delaware Avenue, Delmar):** Grew up in town, graduated college in 83, love the town, knew the laws, could navigate through zoning, good help from building department, well run, good character, good schools. Think sometimes we might be changing and loosening things a little too different. I am for change but in a good way.
- **Rob Sawyer (Sawyer's Screen Printing & Embroidery, 10 Hallwood Road, Delmar):** Live in Delmar, previously located in Watervliet, friends showed us the current space, we are 2 miles away from shop, we like the town. Proximity to home made it perfect place to locate business.
- **Pam Robbins (Policy Research Associates):** Largest employers on Delaware Avenue, 75 employees (50 in building, 25 around the country); we knew the community because we lived there, we have a ton of employees living within blocks of our business on Delaware Avenue, we have stayed there because I like the different features that our location on Delaware Avenue location has to offer such as the walkability, the Rail Trail, the ease of getting food without driving; we will be closed until July and so re-evaluating what we need in terms of a brick and mortar place, we have one year lease, our staying or going will depend on the environment and the community surrounding us.

- **John Hogan (CrossFit Spur, Hamilton Lane, Glenmont):** picked Bethlehem on demographics (population density, space availability for a gym, community ( I had worked at YMCA), tons of advantages of being in Bethlehem because it's a unique community.
- **Guin Gorman (Grace Roofing, 1562 New Scotland Rd, Slingerlands):** grew up on border of Delmar and Albany, grew up in family business, decided to start company in 2004 in construction industry. We wanted to open a business with construction and dance studio for community. We occupy whole building across from Toll Gate. We love the location. What I have experienced over past 15 years both with the dance school and roofing is that this community supports one another.
- **Jeff Bryant (Bryant Insurance Agency, 1280 New Scotland Road, Slingerlands):** we moved our office to Slingerlands in 1986, a business my dad started in 1951. My brother and I came into the business in early 80s. Previously located on Wolf Road, but wanted business closer to clients. We bought a building across from BCBS building and made it into our office and expanded a few times. We enjoy being part of the community, part of the local charities. We also love what the Town has done in terms of recreation such as a mountain bike park. We would like to see rail to trail connected to other areas (connection to Terramere neighborhood to avoid using Cherry Ave Extension). The town has done significant things with regard to recreation and that recreation creates a sense of community.

#### **How critical is location to your business?**

- **Deb Murray (Delaware Plaza, 3 Normanskill Boulevard, Delmar):** Have 30 tenants, new one moving in shortly. Dad bought property over 45 years as an investment. On side, I manage shopping center in Plattsburgh. The Town has always been wonderful to work with. Same with what other people have said. The community supports local businesses and the area. And in return, we do the same. My tenants and us in a management company do the same. Our location has easy access in and out of Delmar. So far us, location is prime. Its nice to see after this year of the pandemic, people are back at the shopping center. There is a good mix. And prospective tenants like that.
- **Julie Sasso (McSharry and Associates Realty, 385 Delaware, Delmar):** Our location is critical and not at all. Originally, we wanted a storefront to be a legitimate business. We had space on 385 Delaware, right at four corners, first floor front, and then we have four residential units in the building, across from Delaware Reform Church. It proved to be much more important than we anticipated. Even though we don't use the space that often, it is important for meeting clients in center of town.
- **Katherine Agneta (Merriman & Pfister, 406 Kenwood Avenue, Delmar):** To have eateries and diverse retail is really important and could be a template for Glenmont and Slingerlands, at the end of Elsmere at Feur Bush. Mixed use is a huge appeal that works for the Town. Its working at 4 corners and could be more substantial. Other parts of the Town of Bethlehem could benefit from this model of a hamlet based hub.

- **Jim Morrill (Delmar Beverage):** My business is different from some. There tends to be more bulky purchase that tends to be heavier. So it's more conducive to people arriving in vehicle so I need visibility, streetfront, and parking on Delaware Avenue. It remains important that the primary mode of transportation, which is the vehicle, remain fully accessible in that space. A store like mine would not be perfect in that kind of hamlet setting. It would need to be more in a setting like Jim and Mary's market (McCaroll's). Needs to be spaces that accommodate businesses like this where people are carrying bulky items to their vehicles.

**What limits your business from expansion / growth? (workforce, capital, pandemic)**

- **John McIntyre (Spotlight Newspapers, 341 Delaware Avenue, Delmar):** biggest problem we have is that many businesses are closed. For long term, we have to look at other issues including traffic, serious infrastructure issues including power (we are out of power whenever the wind blows the wrong way. If you are looking at infrastructure plans, be sure to look at power. The other thing that is important especially in terms of transportation projects is communication with business, especially along Delaware Avenue, and going into Glenmont (where a roundabout is coming in). Upper Delaware project was a disaster for local businesses (though it looks great now) due to poor communication. As other projects come in, we need to look at better communication.
- **Jim Giacone (My Place, 241 Delaware Avenue, Delmar):** end of Elsmere Avenue/Feura Bush Road. At Kendall Square, we put up one building and had a viable tenant but they needed gasoline sales – Stewart's. But when we went back to Clarkson and Leslie, they said they would not support gas station as the Town's previous staff had allowed it. As far as Delaware Avenue, it's a good location, good community. I wanted to give back to the community, be involved with recreation activities. We have a great love for the Town as the location of our primary business.
- **Vince Crisafulli (St. Croix Tan, 266 Delaware Avenue, Delmar):** Pandemic is not help. But from an operation and investment standpoint, it's the worry of the regulatory unknown that could change the cost of an operation. Signage and use restrictions make the space less valuable. If there is less traffic in front of my retail stores, then the space has less value.
- **Karly Decker (Free Movement Pilates on Kenwood near 4 Corners):** I took over existing studio. Pandemic hit. I am booked solid with my personal business. I can see 25 clients a week. I have been appreciative for the grants, like the Town providing masks and sanitizers. I felt supported that this was being given to small businesses. There was a grant that I used for air purifiers (PPE), that was helpful. I appreciate the money that was helpful to small businesses.
- **Marie Bettini (Realty Group, 203 Delaware Avenue):** If you look historically back, towns that are not progressive are the ones that fall behind that newer people do not want to move to, and the tax base shrinks, and cannot support other things. I don't think we should approve things willy nilly but we need to move forward so we don't fall behind. Its great being in business in Town of Bethlehem. Location is important. I support anything Town and Chamber does. Its all of our livelihoods. Don't necessarily need specific location, but the signage visibility helps.

- **Guinn Gorman (Grace Roofing, 1562 New Scotland Rd, Slingerlands):** Community members have serious differences of opinions. What I see is that residents in that areas are afraid of growth. We obviously have some challenges at that intersection (Kenwood Ave/New Scotland Rd). But I wonder if there is a way to meet in the middle. And I don't know. But we have some beautiful vacant buildings. There are reasons for this. I would love to see something in Tollgate again. We want to preserve the buildings, their architecture, but there is a disconnect between residents and the businesses. If there is a fear that business would spoil the area, that is an issue. I work hard to make a peaceful situation between businesses and residents. Is there a better way of connecting residents with businesses and not letting it be such a limitation, remove the fear element.

**What role (if any) does town government play in success of your business?**

- **Jeff Bryant (Bryant Insurance Agency, 1280 New Scotland Road, Slingerlands):** We have been here since 1986. Speaking about the former Blue Cross Blue Shield Building (BCSD)- It was vacant probably for 10 years before that. It's a big mystery (asbestos? Paying taxes? Discussions with owners? Is there a plan? Is it a tax write-off [Rob – Town kept in contact with Picotte Companies, who is the owner, to have quarterly conversations about the building and offer help. We suggested that we could apply for a grant from NYS Empire State Development to support a marketing analysis for the property. And the property owner was not willing to participate in that grant. We held an economic event 5 years ago at property. Its gutted inside. Walls, piping removed. The bottom floor is used for storage and have expressed to us that they are only interested in selling property outright and not interested in breaking up the 80K space into smaller subtenants. But with that amount of space and with the pandemic, how viable is that? Asking price is too high. Property from zoning perspective is zoned hamlet, allows for multi-family, retail, office space.
- **Pam Robbins (Policy Research Associates, 345 Delaware Avenue, Delmar):** Offered to Picotte to take some of BCBS building but brushed off.
- **Julie Sasso (McSharry and Associates Realty, 385 Delaware, Delmar):** How does the Town navigate empty buildings like Tollgate and BCBS. Bottom line is that town does not have control. Community may have unrealistic expectations of what the Town can and cannot control.
- **Jeff Bryant (Bryant Insurance Agency, 1280 New Scotland Road, Slingerlands):** Important to approach vacant property owners and offer to help them. Maybe folks like the owners of the Toll Gate might avail themselves if they knew there was a grant or possibly commercial rent assistance.
- **Guin Gorman (Grace Roofing, 1562 New Scotland Rd, Slingerlands):** Direct assistance (grants or loans) toward whatever it is that keeping the business back (like code compliance) so that we don't have vacant buildings.

### **What town or state regulations could be modified to help your business?**

- **Erma Klein (Delmar Dog Grooming, 30 Hudson Ave, Delmar):** my family has been here since 1800s, watched Delmar go from farm town to what it is today. My concern is that I was involved in the 2005 Comprehensive Plan. There was a group of people who wanted to walk the rules on trespassing. They wanted to make it so they could have picnic by a stream on farmers property. The wanderers law in England. The farmers said that he originally turned a blind eye but then they littered the property, climbed the fence. The town has talked about being more lenient on trespassing. Its not just large landowners but applies to every business. Sometimes, there is animosity toward landowners and business owners. How will the wish lists for regulations affect business owners. The road diet is not going to help businesses.
  - David VanLuven: The Town is not considering changes to make trespass laws more lenient, or to change enforcement responses. We're also not talking about creating restrictions on holiday decorations.
  
- **John McIntyre (Spotlight Newspapers, 341 Delaware Avenue, Delmar):** we have to look at housing. Many businesses have employees that do not live here. There is a disconnect between affordable housing and workforce housing. Communication about changes is very important. They are not always as well communicated as they need to be. What can improve the business community is the communication between business community and the Town. Tell us about new laws and how we will fit into them so we can adapt.

### **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)
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