

DOWNTOWN WILKES-BARRE VISIONING PROCESS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Presented March 26th, 2001

To the Wilkes-Barre Community

INTRODUCTION

Beginning on January 31, 2001, the Wilkes-Barre area community embarked on a collaborative process designed to redefine and revitalize Downtown Wilkes-Barre. The Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry, the Metropolitan Development Corporation, and the Downtown Wilkes-Barre Business Association joined with government, business, institutional, and resident representatives who were interested in changing the course of Downtown. As a result of these exploratory meetings, a decision was made to retain the services of the Pennsylvania Downtown Center (PDC), a statewide nonprofit organization, based in Harrisburg, whose mission is to promote and support the vitality of Pennsylvania's downtowns and traditional neighborhood business district. The PDC scheduled and facilitated a series of eight meetings. Four of the meetings were held with the Steering Committee to coordinate the visioning process and four public meetings were held to obtain broad-based community input into the proposed future of downtown area. Over the course of the four public meetings, over 500 area residents participated in the process. The result of these meetings was a public discussion that produced a new, community based vision for Downtown Wilkes-Barre.

MEETING NO. 1

The first public meeting was held on January 31, 2001 and provided an early indication of the level of interest within the community on the issue of downtown revitalization. Expecting a crowd of approximately 200 people, more than 350 individuals participated in the first of the four public sessions. The purpose of Public Meeting No. 1, held at the Downtown Ramada, was to identify those issues

currently facing the community relative to downtown revitalization and to define the differences between people's perception of the central business district in 2001 and the business district they would like to see in 2010. The responses were aggregated into six, common areas, identified in italics below. The key perceptual differences were as follows:

2001 Perceptions	2010 Visions
<i>Organizationally</i>	
▪ Stagnant	Unified
▪ Unfocused	Focused
<i>Physically</i>	
▪ Deteriorated	Renewed/Restored
▪ Depressed	Historic
▪ Unattractive	Attractive
<i>Promotionally</i>	
▪ Dead	Active
▪ Boring	Exciting Vibrant
<i>Economically</i>	
▪ Empty	Busy Prosperous Diverse
<i>Quality of Life</i>	
▪ Dirty	Clean
▪ Dangerous	Safe Bright
<i>Attitudes</i>	
▪ Sad	Proud
▪ Hopeless	Progressive Friendly

It was clear from the adjectives used to describe the desired downtown Wilkes-Barre of the future that the community was looking for a dynamic, healthy, exciting central business district that would serve as the hub of Northeast Pennsylvania.

MEETING NO. 2

The second meeting was held on February 15th at the Genetti Hotel. The purpose of the second meeting was to identify the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats, working for and against the proposed revitalization effort. The purpose of this exercise was to determine the assets that might help the community attain its vision, and the liabilities that would have to be overcome to do the same. The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) Analysis, which was the result of Meeting Number 2, revealed the following concerns in each of the six areas referenced determined in Meeting No 1.

STRENGTHS

- Public Square
- Historic Architecture
- Riverfront Development
- Institutions of Higher Education

WEAKNESSES

- Lack of Cooperation
- Lack of a Cleaning Strategy

OPPORTUNITIES

- Working With the leading College and University Development Plans & Students
- Building Upon Proposed Riverfront Development.
- Creating a Niche Retail – Theater District.

THREATS

- Continuing Population Decline
- Lack of Response to Revitalization Efforts

The most notable recurring theme across the various SWOT categories were:

- Lack of a Long Range Plan
- Concern With Youth-College Students (both pro and con)

As can be observed from the accompanying Table, there were a wide variety of responses concerning the assets and liabilities facing the community as it moves toward a new attempt at downtown revitalization.

	Design	Organization	Promotion	Econ. Restr.	Quality/Life	Attitudes
Strengths						
Historic Value	X		X			
Public Square	X		X	X	X	
Riverfront	X		X		X	
Com.Concern		X				
Good Buildings				X		
Proximity of PD					X	
Clean Campus					X	
Good Lab. Pool				X		
Ethnic Heritage						X
Caring Vols.						X
Location				X		
Pleasant Envir.						X
Colleges	X	X				
Weaknesses						
No L.R. Plan	X					
Negative Press						X
No Leadership		X				
Lack of Coop.		X		X		X
Cleaning Strat.			X		X	
No Imagination			X			
No Parking				X		
No Foot Patrol					X	
Attit. To Youth						X
Empty Bldgs.					X	
Poor Lighting					X	
Closed @ 5PM					X	
No Activities			X			
Outside Promo.			X			
No Landscape.	X					
Opportunities						
Avail. Real Est.				X		
Indep. Planner				X		
College Dev.				X	X	X
K.O.Z.				X		
Sterling Redev.				X		
Riverfront	X		X	X		X
Retail/Theaters			X	X		
Space Promo			X			
City/Univ. T.F		X				
Master Plan		X				
Reuse Old Bldg.	X					
Threats						
Failing Infrastr	X					
Declining Pop.	X	X		X		
No Master Plan		X				
Regional Malls			X			
Deter. Bldgs					X	
Resist Change						X
Cost to Restore						X
Lack of Coop.				X		
Loss of Young				X		
No Response			X		X	

MEETING NO. 3

The final working public session was held on March 14th at the F.M. Kirby Center. At that meeting the community had an opportunity to react to a modify a draft of a vision statement that had been prepared by the Pennsylvania Downtown Center and given a preliminary review by the Ad Hoc Steering Committee with additional input from selected community representatives who had been attending the various public sessions. The result of that process is the vision statement that is printed on the rear cover of this summary.

In the interim period between the second and third meeting, the Steering Committee also reviewed the results of the process, and, with that information in hand, began the task to determine what “Solutions For Change” would be required to achieve the vision statement as it had been approved. The Steering Committee identified six entities or structures that would be necessary to implement and attain the community’s vision. These are defined on the insert included with this summary.

The 3rd meeting also provided the opportunity for individuals to define their own most important “Solution for Change” and to spend time determining the priority actions steps necessary to begin to rejuvenate downtown Wilkes-Barre, within that area. The results of those discussions are included as follows:

Solution 1: Create a Formal, Market Driven Downtown Development Plan

Action Steps

1. Create a coordinated structure for plan development which involves *all* stakeholders
2. Fund the planning process adequately
3. Hire professional planners/consultants to create the plan
4. Involve the community in reviewing, revising, adopting, and maintaining the plan.

Solution 2: Create a Voluntary Business Improvement District (BID)

Action Steps

1. Organize, fund, and implement new “clean and safe” initiatives
2. Organize a more proactive police presence – i.e., foot/bike patrol
3. Install more and brighter lighting
4. Clean and maintain public spaces and parking facilities
5. Determine future of canopy. Coordinate with new business and retail development efforts

Solution 3: Facilitate New Business Development & Promotion

Action Steps

1. Use Downtown Plan to define target areas and goals
2. Hire and empower a Downtown Manager
3. Use “Main Street Principles” to enhance business development and promotion
4. Work with BID to resolve lighting, canopy, streetscape issues

Solution 4: Create a Task Force on Higher Education & Downtown

Action Steps

1. Develop dialogue between colleges, neighbors, and business community
2. Integrate campus and community planning through open forums
3. Organize student/community groups to work with planners
4. Organize downtown events and entertainment for college community

Solution 5: Create a Downtown Residents Association

Action Steps

1. Organize downtown residents to solve problems and plan for the future
2. Work with City to enforce all laws, including housing codes
3. Work with colleges to ensure cooperation, civility, and thoughtfulness for their neighbors
4. Work with planners to increase the variety of housing options and to develop incentives for people to live downtown

Solution No. 6: Preserve and Protect our
Historic Resources

Action Steps

1. Create a business/preservation coalition to publicize economic benefits of rehabilitation
2. Survey downtown's historic architecture to create a basis for protection
3. Work with State to determine the best structure for protection
4. Create an official body empowered to protect downtown's historic resources