



COMPREHENSIVE PLAN PUBLIC INPUT FOCUS GROUPS

SUMMARY FINDINGS

Prepared for:

Town of Windham Planning Department

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BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

The Town of Windham is beginning the process of updating its Comprehensive Plan. In an effort to assure that the Plan ultimately reflects the values and expectations of Windham residents, the Town is incorporating opportunities for public input throughout the process.

A significant component of this process of gathering input is a detailed survey of Windham residents, planned for October and November of 2014. The survey will be developed to collect the thoughts, ideas, and opinions of Windham residents concerning a variety of issues of importance to the development of the Comprehensive Plan. The Town has contracted with Critical Insights of Portland, ME to assist with the design and administration of the survey.

To provide formative input to aid in the development of the survey, the Town commissioned two focus groups to be conducted with Windham residents. Held on September 17, 2014, this document summarizes resident input offered in the groups.

METHOD & APPROACH

In addition to the forthcoming survey, the Town also contracted with Critical Insights to complete all functions related to the execution of the focus groups. These activities included participant recruitment, development of a line of questioning for the groups, and all requirements related to the hosting and facilitation of the sessions.

With the aim of gathering input from an appropriate cross section of Windham residents, Critical Insights established demographic targets with respect to both age and gender for use in recruitment. The institution of these targets allowed the groups to be populated in a manner which accurately reflected the make-up of the Town's resident base (as determined by 2010 U.S. Census data).

The demographic targets were included in a document used as a contact script and recruitment eligibility screener. In addition to meeting the demographic distributions noted in this screening document, eligible candidate residents were also required to:

- Be registered to vote in the Town of Windham;
- Have lived in the Town for at least two years;
- Not be employed in an industry generally viewed as excluded from market research activities, such as media or marketing research itself;
- Not have participated in a focus group in the past year; and
- Not be (or have a member of the household be) an elected or appointed official or an employee of the Town of Windham.

Further, to assure that participants contacted to take part in the sessions would have a greater likelihood to offer reasonable levels of input and response to the likely line of questioning, candidates were required to claim that they pay at least some attention to things going on at the community level in Windham and also that they discuss these matters with their friends and neighbors in the Town with some regularity.

A total of 10 candidate participants were recruited for each of two sessions (20 in total). To accurately reflect the aforementioned demographic mix, recruitment quotas were established for an equal split between men and women recruited for each session. In terms of age, sessions were segmented by self-reported age, with one group held with residents age 18 to 44 and the second group with those age 45 or older. Within each age group, recruitment was keyed to specific age bands (in the younger group, four respondents were age 18 to 29 and six were between age 30 and 44; in the older group, eight were between age 45 and 64 and two were age 65 or older). All targets were established based on U.S. Census figures.



Additionally, for the younger session in particular, at least some participants were required to have school-age children living at home.

Residents were contacted at random by Critical Insights using geographically-targeted lists of both landline and mobile telephone numbers connected to the Town of Windham.

In total, 17 participants (from the 20 recruited) attended the sessions. All attendees received financial compensation for their time.

Over the course of the sessions, which lasted roughly 90 minutes each and were facilitated by senior staff at Critical Insights, residents responded to a variety of questions about life in Windham. The line of questioning was developed by Critical Insights, with opportunity for input from Town staff.

More specifically, residents were queried about the quality of life in Windham, perceptions of positive or negative momentum in the Town, best and worst things about life in Windham, where they see the Town headed in the future, and other broad areas of inquiry. Participants also discussed issues of residential and commercial growth and development, open space loss and potential preservation, recreational opportunities, transportation and roadways, economic development, and taxation.

A NOTE ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

It is necessary to note that in considering these results, readers should be aware that this summary is based solely on qualitative observations that are only directional in nature. The findings should not be viewed as quantitative, but rather, are intended only to aid in the development of the upcoming survey instrument and to provide the Town with an initial snapshot of residents' mindset on key issues heading into the Comprehensive Plan development process.



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HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE RESEARCH

Summarized below are principal observations in the key areas of questioning covered in the focus groups.

Broad Views on Life in Windham

- Overall, residents appear pleased with life in Windham, with most assigning a “quality of life” score of at least 8 (on a scale of 0 to 10).

Directionally, older residents (those age 45 or older) seem more pleased than do younger residents.

Residents most commonly praised Windham’s small town feel and rural character, its schools, feelings of safety in the Town, and its people and sense of community.

- When asked to reflect on whether Windham had gotten better, worse, or stayed about the same as a place to live over the time they’d lived in the Town, most residents believe that things have remained about the same, often despite what many acknowledged was rapid population growth.

Residents who felt things have improved typically cited benefits that have arisen from the growth of the community, such as more services, increasing retail options, and enhanced school programs that are seen as being driven by an increased student population. Others observed that amidst growth the Town has also tried to address open space, land conservation and access, and recreation opportunities.

Those who believed things have declined in Windham most commonly pointed to issues surrounding the North Windham business corridor, with criticisms focused on a perceived exodus of business, empty storefronts, and continuing traffic concerns. With respect to traffic, observations were made to what is seen as poor and haphazard development in the commercial zone and a general lack of standards.

Others expressed concerns about school capacity, road maintenance, and access to municipal services (i.e. Town Hall hours).



- Given reasonable levels of satisfaction with quality of life in Windham, it was not surprising to learn that – even if given the option to leave – most residents would remain in Windham, largely for the same reasons identified as the principal reasons for being satisfied living in the Town: its small/rural feel, safety, and its schools.

While all younger residents claimed they would stay in Windham (again, largely due to the schools and their family’s level of comfort in the community), a few older residents did note that they would leave, principally due to increasing property taxes and similar increases in the cost of housing in the Town.

- When asked to identify the single best aspect of living in Windham, younger residents overwhelmingly cited Windham’s “location,” while older residents most commonly mentioned attributes centered around Windham’s rural character.

With respect to location, residents see the community’s location between Portland and the lakes and mountains region of Maine as a significant benefit. The proximity to Portland offers perceived easy access to work, as well as culture, restaurants, other amenities; meanwhile, the Town’s location northwest of Portland offers access to lakes, mountains, hiking and biking locations, and natural beauty. Within the Town itself, most – if not all – necessities of daily living are seen as being available within Windham proper.

As a small, rural town, Windham is also seen by many residents as providing a small town feel, significant open space and undeveloped land, and a sense of quiet and privacy – all within minutes of shopping and a half-hour from Portland.

The Future of Windham

- Residents were asked to reflect on the future of the community and consider both the one aspect of Windham they wished would be different in the future and also the one thing about the Town they would want to stay the same and not change.

Residents’ perspectives on the aspects of Windham they would like to see stay the same varied considerably by demographic group.

Younger residents expressed a desire to see the population remain steady and to limit future residential development, largely due to the perceived negative impact of growth on local schools. In a similar vein, many of these same residents advocated to keep any future commercial development isolated and focused on the North Windham corridor.



Conversely, older residents took a different tack in commenting on their similar desire to maintain a status quo in terms of population growth, with observations focused largely on curbing development with hopes of retaining Windham’s rural character, small town feel, open space/undeveloped fields and woods, and sense of community. In related commentary, these residents noted that in addition to preserving the Town’s rural character, limiting development and growth (both residential and commercial) would have a favorable impact on protection of Windham’s groundwater aquifer and overall water quality.

- In considering what they wished would change in the future, comments were frequently focused on desired improvements to the Route 302 commercial district in North Windham, with residents expressing a desire for a “rehab” of the area to improve aesthetics and reduce the “strip mall” feel, a significant re-engineering of traffic flow through North Windham (including potential bypass options), and a clear plan and path forward for any future development to avoid what was characterized by some as being a “shoddy” and “haphazard” approach in the past.

In discussing future development, residents specifically wished for less focus on retail growth and a greater emphasis on bringing different types of commercial development and employers to Windham, with an expressed desire for greater employment options beyond retail (e.g. office, medical, light manufacturing, etc.).

While such comments did not emerge among older residents, younger residents also expressed a desire for changes and investments in long-term infrastructure, including building schools to address overcrowding issues, improving roads and adding bike lanes, adding pedestrian walkways, and developing a community center for both resident gatherings and for recreation (e.g. pool, indoor recreation, etc.).



- When asked to consider the key issues that will be facing the Town in the coming years, comments were remarkably consistent, with residents' feelings largely centered around development and the broader implications of that development.

The discussion of these issues was lengthy and covered numerous perceived consequences of increasing development including:

- The impact of unchecked residential growth on schools, including continued overcrowding and the need for investment in new and expanded facilities.
 - Beyond school buildings, the need for other infrastructure investments made necessary by increased growth, including a sewer system or other means to protect the community's groundwater resources, significant road improvements and ongoing maintenance, and additional public safety requirements.
 - A marked decrease in the amount of valuable open space, fields, and forested land due to continued growth and a perceived degradation of the Town's "small town feel."
- In a general sense, residents concurred that Windham's population is skyrocketing and few saw that trend changing in the future. Indeed, most seemed to be aware of the recent feature article in the press about the building boom in the Town.

However, most believed that the community is simply growing, with no real plan in place to deal with that growth and its implications. Indeed, several residents commented that while the Town has been focused on building up the tax base through development, there seems to have been little attention paid to the consequences of this growth and the impact on Town services. Some believe that the Town needs to step back and consider the needs of Windham's residents and how a continued focus on increasing development will impact their lives.



Future Priorities

- Following discussions of issues such as overcrowded schools, roads in need of repair, reworking of the North Windham business corridor, and protecting the community's water resources, residents were confronted with the reality that municipal needs require funding, largely in the form of property tax revenues. As such, residents were asked to consider additional expenditures they would be willing to fund with additional tax dollars.

Again, feedback did differ substantially according to age-based demographics and, to some extent, gender.

Younger residents, particularly women, expressed a willingness to fund school-related spending, with a particular emphasis on any building initiatives. Most justified increased spending by noting that it is of benefit to the larger community to assure a strong school system.

Consistent with other remarks about outstanding needs, younger residents also expressed a willingness to allocate additional spending/taxes to road maintenance and improvements, infrastructure initiatives (including sewer line and other efforts to protect groundwater), and economic development efforts with the aim of creating viable, non-retail employment opportunities in Windham.

In terms of additional taxation, older residents were less focused on school improvements, but seemed more than willing to fund expenditures that would be of benefit to a broader cross-section of the community, such as a community center. Discussion of a potential community center gave rise to ancillary comments on additional amenities, such as swimming pools, ice rinks, and meeting space.



Implications for Upcoming Quantitative Survey

- Not only did the discussion groups provide insights and learning as a stand-alone component of the research plan for the Town, residents' observations from the groups provided important input for the development of the forthcoming community-wide survey.
- More specifically, the groups provided valuable observations on potential question areas for the survey and upcoming community meetings, including:
 - Views on growth, community sustainability, and perceived balance between population growth and preservation of rural character and resources;
 - Similarly, thoughts on consequences and implications of growth (or rural preservation);
 - Perspectives on infrastructure improvements, including school facilities, roadways, community facilities, and wastewater systems; and
 - Outlook on a path forward for economic development in the Town, including priority industries and perceived modifications necessary for the Route 302 business corridor.



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