

CHAPTER 9

Economic Development

*Westport Master Plan * 2004*

9. Economic Development

9.1 Introduction

For years there has been an ongoing discussion among town residents about what, if any, economic development Westport should promote. We have attempted to discuss economic development within the context of the Master Plan, and to point out the opportunities and problems with various economic development strategies.

The most ambitious and detailed work on economic development in the recent past is the Strategic Economic Development Plan prepared by the Westport Local Partnership in 1996 (1996 Plan). This Plan was the result of much work by residents working with a planning consultant and reflects extensive citizen input. Parts of this chapter are edited versions of that document.

Since the 1996 Plan was prepared, changes have occurred in Westport and the surrounding Southeastern Massachusetts landscape. The economy has gone from stagnant to robust to mild recession and hopefully soon back to growing. Fall River and New Bedford have become more economically sound, and their economies continue to shift from garment and fabric dependence to service and light manufacturing/distribution. Their industrial parks have grown and prospered, and have one of the largest net growth areas for employment. The fishing industry is in weaker shape than the recent past, and prospects are not good for a rebound in the near future.

Westport has continued to grow in population and residential development. Housing construction is one of the biggest sources of employment, with most of it being in single-family housing. Multifamily housing has been promoted recently under the state's Chapter 40B affordable housing law. There have not been any new medium or large businesses established in Westport in several years. Map 9-1 Westport Businesses depicts the general distribution of existing businesses in Westport. This map does not purport to depict every business, but gives a general idea of the location of business activity in the Town.

In spite of the 1996 Plan, there has not been a look at economic development with respect to either the financial impact on the Town or maintaining the desirable attributes of the community.

At the time of the 1996 Plan several assumptions drove many of the proposals. The key ones were: a casino in New Bedford, a Coastal Zone Research Laboratory in New Bedford, the Port of New Bedford would receive funding for improvements, the New Bedford Airport would be significantly expanded, the MBTA rail line would be extended to Fall River and New Bedford, and water and sewer service from Fall River could be secured in the near future. The emphasis was on developing the Route 6 corridor, and to a lesser extent, the Route 177 corridor for industrial and commercial, including an industrial site at the northwest corner of Route 6.

Changes in the landscape since 1996 that affect earlier assumptions and plans are that the casino, with its anticipated spin off, has not happened, water and sewer from Fall River is still a wish, with actual service years away, and that both Fall River and New Bedford have recently been very active and successful in attracting tenants to their industrial parks. These parks provide employment opportunities for the region, but have made industrial development in Westport less likely. Industrial development that does come to this region will probably locate in fully serviced industrial parks that offer many amenities and can provide favorable financing incentives through their industrial commissions, although certain large regional businesses, such as Quaker Fabrics, have typically expanded outside of industrial parks.

9.2 Goals and Objectives

The industries of farming and commercial fishing remain the keystone of Westport's economic vitality. Its exceptional coastlines on the Atlantic Ocean and Westport River attract visitors who patronize local businesses during their stay. Westport should build on what it has and promote tourism to attract more visitors.

Goal 1

Position Westport to effectively pursue and develop commerce that is harmonious with the Town's vision.

- Expand administrative capabilities to effectively support economic development.
- Review and update the 1996 Strategic Economic Development Plan.
- Seek federal and state grants for water and sewerage program on Route 6.
- Pursue the dredging of the Westport River to ensure the viability of fishing and other marine activities.
- Enhance and streamline the permit process.
- Address the visual environment for site design, landscaping, signage, lighting, and parking.
- Encourage the development of new industries using emerging environmental technologies.
- Discourage additional used car lots.

Goal 2

Initiate programs for balanced economic growth in Westport.

- Develop strategies for attracting tourists to visit and patronize local businesses.
- Develop strategies to control the types of commercial development.
- Support and interact with local business groups.

Goal 3

Provide increased business opportunities within Westport that are compatible with natural and cultural resources.

- Promote cottage industries and small family businesses such as professional offices, personal services, and bed and breakfasts.
- Preserve and encourage the economic viability of prime agricultural lands and agricultural based businesses.
- Preserve and encourage the economic viability of prime commercial fishing based businesses.
- Preserve and expand fish and shellfish ventures along the shoreline and encourage the expansion of those activities into new fields such as aquaculture.
- Cluster businesses to minimize strip development.

9.3 Assessment

9.3.1 Assets

Overall, Westport exhibits many positive assets that make it attractive for economic development.

Access

Westport is easily accessible from Interstate Highway 195. The New Bedford Municipal Airport is nearby, and access to Boston will be enhanced with the proposed extension of the commuter rail.

Available Labor Force

As of May 2001 the total labor force in Westport was 7,669. Of this number, 306 were unemployed, for an unemployment rate of 4%. Many residents commute to other communities for employment.

Training and Education

The University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, Bristol County Community College, and the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, offer extensive and unique educational resources. In addition to Westport High School, Dismal Regional Vocational High School and the Bristol County Agriculture School in Dighton provide excellent courses for high school students. UMASS Dartmouth recently opened the Graduate School of Marine Sciences and Technology in New Bedford, and the Advanced Technology and Manufacturing Center in Fall River. Private schools in the area also offer specialized training and education.

9.3.2 Economic Target Area Designation

In March of 2003 Westport was accepted in the Fall River Economic Target Area. This designation allows Westport to participate in a regional effort at addressing common economic development needs. The economic goals of the ETA are “to retain existing businesses and jobs, attract new development (environmentally friendly) and employment, and generate tax revenues.”

In addition, Westport’s application stated, “The designation of Economic Opportunity Areas (EOA) will occur in appropriately zoned areas, consisting of environmentally sensitive industries (fishing, agriculture, tourism, and eco-tourism) and other commercial and/or industrial activities. Several site specific areas exist along Routes 6 and 177 commercial corridors which may be considered for designation and attract development, create employment, and increase tax revenues.”

Westport is eligible for assistance from:

- *Southeastern Economic Development loan programs*
- *Small Business Development Center*
- *Massachusetts Office of Business Development*
- *Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District*

State and federal funding may be secured through leveraging private sector investment and job creation commitments. Farmers and businesses are able to apply for equipment and real estate loans through participating banks.

9.3.3 Route 6 Corridor

Land Use

The Route 6 corridor extends from the Fall River town line in northwest Westport to the Dartmouth town line where it intersects with Route 177. Route 6 also intersects with Route 88, which extends from Interstate 195 to the Horseneck Beach and East Beach areas.

Anchored by Whites Restaurant and the Hampton Inn on the western end, the Route 6 corridor contains a mix of commercial and residential uses with numerous houses converted to commercial uses. Route 6 contains 3 shopping plazas (Watuppa, Westport, and Pond View), two financial institutions (Bank of America, previously Fleet Bank) and the Westport Federal Credit Union), and the main Westport Post Office.

When first traveling the Route 6 corridor one gets the impression that there are areas of open land which might be developed. However, much of it is wetlands or saturated soils extending north and south. The largest area of wetlands is approximately one mile of Route 6 frontage centered near the interchange with Route 88. Another mile to the southeast is the crossing of Bread and Cheese Brook running in a north to south direction under Route 6. Approximately two-thirds of a mile southeast of Bread and Cheese Brook is another area of extensive wetlands extending southward, eventually forming a branch that joins Bread and Cheese Brook south of Route 177. A few small lots near the Route 88 interchange were previously filled in. They are shallow lots and wetland regulations prohibit additional filling. The only major business along this stretch of road is Mid City Steel, located just east of the Route 6 intersection with Davis Road. Mid City Steel is set back from Route 6 on a previously filled area completely surrounded by wetland with the exception of an entry road to the south and the Old Colony Railroad, Watuppa Branch right-of-way, on its northern boundary.

Infrastructure

Water and sewer has been extended from Fall River into Westport only to the point of the Hampton Inn area. Water extends to Greenwood Terrace, and north on Davis Road. Without adequate water and sewerage it does not appear feasible to develop large retail/commercial projects in the Route 6 corridor. However, some land currently occupied by used car lots and residences, and other low-intensity uses could be converted to other more intensive commercial uses.

9.3.4 Route 177 Corridor

Land Use

The land use pattern along the Route 177 corridor is a mixture of residential and open space lightly interspersed with commercial facilities. There are a number of residences that have offices or businesses on the residential property. Most of these businesses, whether in the home or separate commercial enterprises, cater to local clientele.

There are numerous wetlands and saturated soils along Route 177. Tributaries to the east branch of the Westport River include a branch known as the Noquochoke River near the Dartmouth town line, and the Bread and Cheese Brook with another secondary tributary occurring between Forge Road and Gifford Road. Wetland areas exist just west of Gifford Road, and on either side of Route 88, along with a very large wetland just east of Sanford Road.

9.3.5 Business Zoning

All business uses are permitted in the business zone with the exception of tire storage yards, which are permitted in the unrestricted zone by special permit of the Board of Appeals.

9.3.6 Villages

In 2001, the Boston Society of Architects led a multi-discipline charrette at Northeastern University that resulted in two conceptual designs for Central Village. The majority of those

attending a public meeting to review the two designs favored the compact design. It depicts the Town Hall as the focal point. Clustered around Town Hall would be housing, businesses, and Town offices all within walking distance of each other. Housing would be a mix of affordable, senior, and market rate houses, apartments, and condominiums. Shared off street parking would facilitate shopping without having to drive from one establishment to another. Farm stands would be encouraged to continue because they enhance the agriculture nature of Westport. The area immediately surrounding Town Hall could be landscaped to form a village green or park (see Appendix A.).

Such innovative concepts of village design should generate interest in Westport and encourage businesses to invest in its future.

9.3.7 Constraints

There are two major constraints for economic development:

- *Lack of adequate water and sewerage to support large sites and buildings.*
- *Lack of an organizational entity to oversee the economic development process.*

9.4 Recommendations

1. Establish the position of Economic Development Officer to initiate, coordinate, and nurture business enterprises that contribute to the economic prosperity of Westport.

Westport has been unable to effectively encourage and manage economic development because it does not have anyone in Town government whose responsibilities are targeted to economic development with the resources to support such an endeavor. Local businesses and organizations are carrying out much of the Town's economic development efforts, but they need help. Establishing the position of an Economic Development Officer is an essential step in assuring Westport's prosperity.

The Economic Development Officer would work with all types of businesses, engaging in a wide range of activities including planning and regulatory issues, grant submissions, small business development and management, and business recruitment and retention. He or she would have ultimate responsibility for the successful implementation of all aspects of economic development

2. Revise the 1996 Strategic Economic Development Plan to reflect current conditions and options for the Route 6 and Route 177 corridors.

Although the 1996 Strategic Economic Development Plan contains a number of recommendations that were feasible at the time, changes have occurred that render parts of the plan obsolete. The plan should be updated to reflect current conditions and be updated on a continuing basis.

3. Update zoning laws, as appropriate, to provide flexibility for locating businesses in areas that would support the overall objectives of the Master Plan.

Zoning laws review and revision, particularly for villages where a mix of certain types of businesses and residences should be able to co-exist. Also, along the Routes 6 and 177 corridors, some business zones might be extended where further economic development or redevelopment appears feasible.

Two possible types of business zone districts would be a village business district in Central Village and a neighborhood business district to control neighborhood convenience commercial uses in locations throughout the Town. Provisions regarding parking, setbacks, and the other controlling dimensional factors of zoning would be tailored to the specific zone to achieve desired results.

Westport's natural beauty combined with its historical elements result in a distinctive small town character that sets the town apart from many of its neighbors. Zoning laws should be viewed from this perspective. Because of this consideration, it is recommended that the Town prohibit the issuance of new Class Two licenses which permit used car lots.

4. Initiate a site plan review process and possible design review for planned commercial ventures and structures in order to ensure the quality of the general functioning, safety, and visual aesthetics of commercial areas.

Westport residents are concerned with the appearance and design of Westport business areas, particularly along the Route 6 and Route 177 corridors, and to some extent along Main Road. Site plan review under zoning can address many of these issues. Aesthetic issues may best be addressed by an advisory board. Therefore, it is proposed that Westport institute site plan review under zoning and consider the creation of an advisory review committee to recommend design guidelines for commercial and public buildings in Westport.

An advisory design review process could help improve the appearance of Westport over time without necessarily adding to the red tape and cost of project approval.

5. Support, foster, and market local businesses such as retail goods and services, marine trades, fishing, agriculture, and high-quality cultural and recreational tourism.

Westport and its vicinity are already a major Massachusetts tourist destination. Horseneck Beach is one of the state's most popular state run facilities. The town also contains a significant number of seasonal housing units that increase the population base during the summer months. Countless travelers pass through Westport annually on their way to and from Cape Cod and hundreds of thousands visit the outlet malls and marine attractions in nearby New Bedford and Fall River.

New commercial enterprises such as retail goods and services, marine trades, fishing, agriculture, aquaculture, and quality cultural and recreational undertakings could complement and enhance existing businesses. In addition, Westport's scenic beauty and exceptional coastlines on the Atlantic Ocean and Westport River attract visitors who patronize local businesses during their stay. Westport has the potential for increasing tourism through innovative ventures such as a farmers market, bed and breakfasts, and country inns. Performances of Concerts at the Point are inevitably sold out, demonstrating the demand for quality entertainment, in this case, music. The auditoriums of the Westport High School and Middle School could be used for different types of performances such as plays and concerts. Westport would benefit not only from a cultural standpoint, but also from income generated by fees and patronage of local businesses by visitors.

6. Revise the cumbersome and time-consuming process for obtaining permits.

Westport should review its permit process to ensure that it is simple and direct while at the same time meeting its obligation to safeguard the public interest. Shuffling applicants from one board to another wastes time and fosters a bureaucratic and anti-business atmosphere. It is recommended that a person in the Town offices be designated to guide applicants through the permit process. This person could be the recommended Economic Development Officer.

7. Encourage aquaculture and marine sciences uses

Provide businesses that specialize in aquaculture and marine uses with special consideration and status in zoning bylaws. Incorporate zoning to encourage aquaculture and marine-related uses in appropriate areas with appropriate site planning controls.

Utilize regional resources.

Regional outreach and cooperation by the Town for commercial enterprises and tourism would increase the efficiency and effectiveness of economic development efforts. Because of Westport's limited population base and financial resources, strategic initiatives in collaboration with regional agencies and other municipalities are recommended.

For commercial development, establish close working relationships with:

- Fall River Office of Economic Development
- New Bedford Industrial Development Commission
- SRPEDD - Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District
- Fall River Chamber of Commerce
- New Bedford Chamber of Commerce
- Westport Business to Business

For tourism development, establish close working relationships with:

- Bristol County Convention and Visitors Bureau SRPEDD - Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District
- Fall River Chamber of Commerce
- New Bedford Chamber of Commerce

UMASS Dartmouth recently created two centers that provide unique support for regional economic development.

- **Advanced Technology and Manufacturing Center, located in Fall River**
- **The Center for Marine Science and Technology, located in New Bedford.**

8. Support and participate with Westport business organizations.

Local business organizations, such as Westport Business to Business, play an important role in attracting and assisting business. The Town, through a new Economic Development Officer, should work closely with these organizations and provide whatever support it can.

9. Establish a farmers market.

Westport should pursue the concept of establishing a farmers market where local farmers could set up stalls to collectively sell their produce. Farmers markets exist throughout the

United States and usually draw large crowds. A farmers market would draw out of town visitors and not only benefit local farmers, but restaurants and retail businesses as well.

10. Participate in the state's program for agriculture tourism.

The Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture has a Bureau of Markets that "promotes the viability and sustainability of Massachusetts' food and agriculture businesses through marketing and educational activities". In conjunction with this program, the Massachusetts Highway Department has an Agriculture Signage Program that "allows for the placement of agriculture directional signs along state roadways for farms located off these roadways." With Routes 6, 88, and 177, Westport has abundant opportunity to have signs directing travelers to local farm stands and agri-tourism destinations.

11. Develop a uniform signage program for local non-agriculture tourism.

Complementing an agriculture signage program could be a local signage program directing visitors to various businesses and restaurants located throughout Westport. Included in the program should be local artists and skilled craftsmen who, although relatively unknown, produce products of exceptional quality. The Town could encourage local enterprises that would benefit from tourism to participate in a uniform signage program for Westport. Signage programs in Vermont have proven very successful in promoting local businesses.

12. Actively pursue the dredging of the Westport River.

The Westport River is an integral part of Westport's well being. Dredging the river is critical to the prosperity of fishing and aquaculture, a paramount concern of Westporters.

NOTES

1. Please refer to Section 12.7 of Chapter 12 for the complete Action Plan for Economic Development.
2. At the Public Meeting of February 26, 2003, a suggestion was made that the position description of the suggested Economic Development Officer could include the function of Revenue Enhancement Officer.
3. At the Planning Board meeting of March 25, 2003 Vice-Chairman David Wallace suggested that the Town do more to attract environmentally sensitive tourism. The Board also discussed a coordinated system of attractive signs directing tourists to local businesses.
4. At the Planning Board meeting of April 8, 2003, Wayne Sunderland emphasized the need to plan the Rte 177 corridor as well as the Rte 6 corridor.