



Town of Acton
Comprehensive Community
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ROUNDTABLE: TOWN STAFF/DEPARTMENT HEADS June 4, 2008

Participants:

Karen Kucala - Asst. Finance Director
Stephen Barrett - Finance Director
Marcia Rich - Library Director
Corey York - Asst. Engineer
Mark Hald - IT Director
Catherine Fochtman - Recreation Director
Merrily Evdokimoff - Nursing Administrator
Dean Charter - Director of Municipal
Properties & Tree Warden
Robert Craig - Fire Chief

Roland Bartl – Planning Director
Doug Halley - Health Director
Russell Robinson - Highway Super.
Frank Ramsbottom - Building Inspector
Steve Ledoux - Town Manager
Frank Widmayer - Police Chief
Tom Tidman - Director of Conservation
Jean Fleming - Director of Council on Aging
Jennifer Friedman - Director of Citizens Library
John Murray - Asst. Town Manager

Purpose of meeting: *To get a preliminary sense from Department Heads of what their realities and informed perceptions are regarding Acton's assets and challenges. As we move forward to identify priority issues it is important to have input from those "on the ground", dealing with issues day to day with insight into what works and what doesn't work and why. Additionally department heads were asked to identify potential future challenges.*

What in your experience makes Acton a good place to live and/or work?

- Nice to work near where you live (3)
 - Walk to work
 - Enjoy living and working in the same place, nice being close to home
- Well-run town
 - Town sees the big picture
 - Willingness to support projects
 - Allowance for dissenting voice to be heard
- Town staff responsiveness to community goes above and beyond (2)
- Location – before you hit the commuter traffic going to Boston (3)
 - Non-stressful commute



- Professionalism of staff (6)
 - Staff are really industry leaders, experts in their field, very high caliber
 - Town attracts good staff
 - Weekly staff meeting important and useful – even for those who don’t see each other on a regular basis, knowing that Wednesday morning meeting is there keeps the staff communicating.
 - Staff are “thoroughbreds”
 - All chip in and solve the problem (don’t have the attitude of “that’s not my job...”)
 - Not afraid to take on new tasks

- Support within community and within Town Hall

- The longevity of the employees is very significant leading to depth of understanding of issues (3)
 - Know each other well which leads to smooth working relationships

- Cooperative spirit, very helpful, lots of support, willingness to work together
 - Results in being able to do a lot in-house
 - “The people I work with are really wonderful and cooperative”

- High-end professional volunteers tremendous
 - If they want it, they pass it
 - High level of volunteerism – working hard, smooth running

- The Town is generous to the needy
 - Supportive to the elderly too

- The Departments feel supported
 - E.g. small W.Acton library probably wouldn’t exist in another town, but received a lot of community support

- Town’s population
 - Is very educated (including high school kids on committees)
 - Diversity of town’s population (poses some language problems but is a plus)
 - Is passionate
 - Greening of Acton
 - Multi-culturalism
 - Compassionate towards the needy (e.g. social worker position voted to be funded at Town Meeting)



What in your experience is your least favorite aspect of living and/or working in Acton?

- Too much funding goes to the schools without enough left over to do what needs to be done in terms of the other town services
 - Results in a fight for resources
 - More funding is needed
 - Divisive : “schools group” vs. “non-schools group” – large chasm and division among the population
 - Acton is at the bottom 3% of towns in the state regarding the amount of money devoted to municipal government
 - Schools have “emotional advantage” and grass roots support like PTOs
- Need more volunteers that will take leadership roles
- The pressure of the community’s high expectations (without the financial support to be able to provide the level of service they expect)
 - Unrealistic expectations from the part of residents
- Inequity in funding levels makes it very hard to meet expectations
 - The pressure of being asked to do more for less is felt at the departmental level but also the organization as a whole is too stretched
 - Not enough hours in the day to do all that is needed to be done
 - Seems to be more people worn out, asking for more sick days
 - Newcomers seem to be higher income with higher expectations sometimes with a sense of entitlement
- The system and structure of Committees often makes it difficult to get decisions to move forward
 - (often re-visit decisions -- e.g. recent examples: street lights, sidewalks-- when a decision had already been reached to move forward).
 - When a project is clearly not desired a Committee is formed to study it anyway wasting resources (response to perceived “hysteria”)
- It is sometimes a challenge to have to do what the community wants when it goes against what you believe.
- There seems to have been a lot of turn-over until recently
- Administering to a politically-entitled group
- The public process can sometimes derail projects that have had a lot of support because just when you get started another group comes along and opposes what you thought was a go-ahead.
 - Allowing for the dissenting voice is sometimes too much – it ends up creating the perception that it is a more majority opinion than is the reality



- The salary issue is in the process of being addressed (this will be good when parity issue is addressed).
- Need to do public relations campaign re: town services, etc.
 - Lay people don't understand the budget process
 - Needs to be more discussion in group and public settings
 - It would be interesting to ask residents: "How important is Town government in your day-to-day lives?" (as opposed to town services)
 - Town needs to do more advocacy -- think of "quantitative arguments" regarding need for and impact of services.
 - No time to do PR, education campaign, too busy trying to get work done
 - Need to educate residents as to the value of town services
 - Schools need to be part of the marketing plan and PR effort
 - Need to reiterate the purpose of town services
 - Bad press (e.g. re: Boston police officers) is generalized and people have misperceptions regarding reality
 - Example of how PR has worked in the past – tours of the police and fire stations made people realize how much a new municipal safety building was needed.
- Town Meeting process is "broken"
- No way of achieving consensus, currently often undemocratic way of deciding priorities
 - Chair of BOS gives direction without full consensus of Board and no one dares say "no" (hope that with new Board this will change)
 - Board membership changes and then review the same thing over and over again.
 - It is hard to protect departments from having to go down rat holes
- Overcrowding in the Town Hall
 - Need to address space needs

Can you identify any future challenges or changes (e.g. demographics, technology) that may affect your Department's buildings and/or services?

- Increasing traffic
 - has meant need for sidewalks and lights – trying to provide and failing due to lack of funding and lack of support
 - increase on demand of police parking lot
- Rental projects
 - are bringing in lower income residents, gang members and causing a variety of problems
 - 40B housing projects impact on services



- Diversity of population
 - Asian community, higher income, but not necessarily connected
 - Brazilian community, lower income, not plugged in
 - Need for bilingual services
 - Need to get used to different accents
- Demand for youth services
- Aging population: Increasing 60+ population (approx. 3,400 residents now)
 - Senior Center expansion project is being studied by a Task Force, exploring options for both outdoor and indoor space.
 - Projected future population: 6,000 seniors in 2030
 - Challenge to respond to needs for physical exercise, intellectual stimulation, and need for socializing
 - Increasingly culturally diverse group of seniors, language, culture
 - More requests for evening and weekend usage results in increased cost for staffing and utilities
 - Increasing traffic results in van driver driving for longer hours than before
 - Increasing real estate taxes is an issue for seniors on a fixed income
 - Fire Department feels the impact of the increasing aging population in an increase in EMS calls. Additional assisted living and senior housing projects is expected to increase these further.
- What about water and waste water services – what do people think about the need for these?
- Predict increasing demand for virtual town services in the future
 - This will save staff a lot of time if residents can take care of more and more on-line, especially researching records
 - May result in more need for public relations as town staff will be even more invisible than now
 - Need to reorganize due to changes in communications technology (e.g. shift from phones to e-mail); need to retrain staff
 - New challenges (e.g. keeping up with amount of e-mails)
 - Need to decide: “What are the core services we provide?” (e.g. safety net, public safety, etc.)
 - Document management systems
 - GIS will be a large self-service tool for staff, the public and real estate agents
- Increasing interest in “green” and sustainable development
 - is going to cost a lot more (and there doesn’t seem to be additional sources of funding in the foreseeable future).
 - It also impacts the staff’s workload.
 - How will we save energy? (streetlights, walking, etc.) and other such decisions that are difficult to make



- Aging infrastructure will need attention
- Desires regarding historic preservation and taking into account community character take time and there is not enough staff time available.
- It will be a challenge to complete Comprehensive Community Plan in such a way so that it is not just a “wish list”
 - Need to address action items in a realistic way
 - How can the town as an organization work most effectively and efficiently so that they don’t get sidetracked from individual agendas and stay focused on larger goals
- Due to increasing cost of building there has been a recent trend which is expected to continue of more renovations than new construction. This requires a lot of staff time in helping to research issues.
- Cost of open space is very high
 - Need to prioritize parcels
 - Perhaps buying portions of properties is an answer
 - Fiscal impact analysis sometimes demonstrates that purchasing the parcel as open space is more cost effective than allowing it to develop as housing
- Increasing demand for recreation, increased demand on facilities, Nara, etc.
 - More and more recreation wanted locally
 - Demand for athletic fields
- Challenge to incorporate additional development, esp. 40B
- Challenge of public process derailing projects
- Need to respond to next generation and ways of communicating
 - Use of computers
 - 3-D imaging
- Library facing challenges including
 - Aging workforce
 - Need for more staff due to growing usage
 - Changes in technology are rapid, need to communicate these to staff and the public
 - Need for more opportunities for staff development
 - Language/diversity issues
 - Fear of vandalism and other behaviors (are increasing at the schools)
- Need for more schools – town cooperation
 - Should be more community service from the schools
 - Business class – could help out at town hall (a couple of people who grew up in Acton worked on the town census as students)



- “We need to focus on tomorrow’s problems”
 - “We are reactive, spending too much time solving yesterday’s problems”
- Need to do succession planning
 - “How will we attract younger people to do public service?” (used to be considered noble and dignified, no longer as much)