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To: Downtown West Orange Alliance Board of Directors

CC: Jef Buehler

From: Donna Ann Harris

Subject: Observations and Recommendations about SWOT exercise in West Orange NJ

Main Street New Jersey is providing consulting services to the Downtown West Orange Alliance as part of the State's effort to enhance the growth of participating MSNJ organizations. Donna Ann Harris of Heritage Consulting Inc. was asked to facilitate a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) exercise held on the evening of December 11, 2014.

After review of the raw notes from the SWOT exercise, we are making the following observations and some recommendations to solve some short-term problems discussed during the meeting. Jef Buehler, State Director of Main Street New Jersey and Improvement District Programs has reviewed and added feedback to this memo.

Most of the issues discussed at the SWOT cannot be solved by the Downtown West Orange Alliance (DWOA) alone. The first part of this memo identifies opportunities where direct action by the DWOA Board, committees and volunteers can solve problems in the near term.

At the end of the memo, we offer a summary of the major issues discussed during the SWOT where the DWOA Board can expand their already high quality existing partnership with the Township to attempt to make progress towards solving some of these pressing matters.

We hope these observations and recommendations are useful and feed into the larger effort to identify a handful of strategic priorities for the organization's long-term future as part of the Strategic Planning process.

Organizational issues (internal)

Downtown West Orange Alliance Board and Staff

Observations

- Megan was specifically mentioned several times, and she was described as committed and enthusiastic.
- The Board is regarded as professional and committed.
- The majority of Downtown West Orange Alliance Board members have or own a business downtown.

Recommendations

- Megan is clearly well regarded because of her dedication and hard work. The Alliance should make sure that she gets plenty of help and support to avoid executive director burn out.
- There is a good representation of business owners on the DWOA Board. We understand that downtown has landlords who are not tenants. Consider if a landlord association should be a subcommittee of the Downtown Alliance.
- Ensure that there is a channel for resident volunteers to engage on the Board, particularly if they have proven their dedication by working on projects and committees/teams in the past.

DWOA Volunteers

Observations

- The Downtown West Orange community was described several times as cohesive, and that everyone works as a unit.
- Teams have been formed but there were complaints about the low number of volunteers and the need for more community participation in DWOA efforts.
- There were comments about committee/team structure may not be very effective.

Recommendations

- Training is needed to successfully recruit volunteers to work on Team projects. We can provide this training on behalf of MSNJ.
- Work plans for all Team projects are needed. Work plans will help you to recruit volunteers.
- Training on developing work plans and volunteer job descriptions is needed. We can provide this training on behalf of MSNJ.
- Work with the Executive Director on delegating tasks to volunteers and teams.

- Seek new volunteers through new partnerships and community outreach. Utilize social media to recruit volunteers by creating volunteer job descriptions to post. We can supply sample volunteer job descriptions or conduct training for your Teams to create volunteer job descriptions.
- Have a regular, fun, and informal orientation meeting for all volunteers, perhaps quarterly. We can provide suggestions for an agenda.
- Work to include the Hispanic community as volunteers by translating the web site, newsletters and volunteer job descriptions into Spanish or other languages as appropriate.
- Employ a combination of paid and volunteer work to keep events and projects going

DWOA Fundraising

Observations

- People were pleased with the fiscal management of DWOA.
- The vast majority of the organization's revenue is from the SID.
- DWOA manages a matching fund for façade improvements, but some people are not aware of the program.
- Some sponsorships are solicited for events.
- Special events were never mentioned as source of revenue. DWOA does not solicit residential memberships, write grants for projects, or undertake any events designed only to raise funds.
- It seems like there is just not enough money to undertake all the projects and ideas that stakeholders want to accomplish.

Recommendations

- Grow the budget incrementally over time. Review your work plans for 2015 to identify additional revenue opportunities for all projects.
- Diversify your revenue sources. We can help you identify one or two additional fundraising activities this year that you can grow over time to bring additional revenue to the organization.
- Begin to identify likely volunteers to add to your Organization Team who might want to help with fundraising efforts.
- Review your sponsorship opportunities, and consider increasing some categories and offering more opportunities. Consider creating a yearlong sponsorship package to encourage sponsors to support projects throughout the year. We have many samples to show.
- Assess if there is enough community and resident support to create a membership program. We can provide training and samples of good membership programs.
- Work with the Township grant writer to begin to identify funding sources for projects in downtown.

- Invite residents to join the DWOA for a nominal amount. This creates literal buy-in and also shows your elected officials that their constituents care about the downtown. We can provide samples and advice if you wish to undertake a residential membership campaign.

DWOA Events and Activities

Observations

- Many downtown events are considered to be Township-wide successes
- The availability of matching grants for façade improvements is a great strength for the DWOA.
- There is a great deal of support for expanding the farmers market.
- There were concerns about a lack of activities for school children and young adults in downtown.
- The new library director is very enthusiastic about partnering with DWOA. You are lucky to have your library downtown.
- The Thomas Edison National Historical Park is located downtown, and visitors create many opportunities for the downtown retailers and eateries. The staff of the Park are highly enthusiastic about partnering with DWOA on a variety of projects.

Recommendations

- The Thomas Edison National Historical Park receives more than 50,000 visitors yearly, all are potential shoppers and restaurant goers for your downtown. There is no visitor guide to highlight shopping and dining options. Work with the Park and the local tourism/Destination Management Organization to create a printed map/visitor guide for Park visitors.
- Use the existing vacant storefronts downtown for popup shops. Work with property owners to identify shops that might be good candidates for pop up shops. This is a great way to try out new business types and show them there is a local demand for their products and services. Main Street New Jersey can provide you with guidance on how to run a pop-up program.
- There was enthusiasm for an Art Walk. Work with the Promotion Team to develop a work plan for this project.
- Work with the existing vendors at the farmers market to expand the hours or add an additional day.
- Self-guided walking tours were discussed during the SWOT. Work with the Design Team to create a work plan for this project.
- Promote the historic and cultural sites, like the Thomas Edison National Historical Park site and public library, tie them together and pool resources with collaborative events.

Internal and external DWOA Communications and Marketing

Observations

- There is already informative marketing through the shop local initiative, Shop West Orange
- DWOA makes good use of the local access channel to update the public.
- Brand awareness is increasing for the Downtown West Orange Alliance.
- There is no DWOA website.
- There is a DWOA Facebook page with a good number of fans.
- There was concern about miscommunication about SID opportunities between owners and tenants, since the property owner is paying the SID assessment.

Recommendations

- Continue to promote DWOA to all local businesses in the downtown district.
- Budget funds and create a DWOA web site this year. It is essential for Main Street organizations to have a website for both the organization and the district itself.
- Create a visitor tab on your website, and include the visitor guide/map and other useful information for visitors coming to town. We can supply an outline of the contents of a quality web site for discussion with the Organization Team as they consider budgeting and identifying a vendor to create your new website.
- Consider if you wish to create individual pages for downtown businesses that do not currently have their own web site, on the DWOA web site. Charge a modest fee for this service, which will include a URL for each business for one year.
- Create a visitor guide and map as mentioned above. Make this map/guide available to all the businesses in downtown.
- Determine if you wish to engage in strategic marketing for the different downtown areas: restaurant zone, Edison zone, etc. If so, make sure you tie together the four separate areas of Main Street together through your overall branding scheme.
- Review your current social media efforts, and determine what should be added in 2015. Work with the Organizational Team to identify volunteers to help.
- Identify marketing professionals in the community to help the Economic Restructuring Team to identify businesses to recruit, including potential anchor stores and/or national retailers. Utilize the market research that MSNJ provides, and the information to be gathered from the Online Consumer and Stakeholder Survey to be completed this winter to identify specific business to recruit.

Merchants, Restaurants, Redevelopment and the Business Climate in Downtown

Observations

- The general consensus is that the Township is supportive of business.
- Businesses seem to cross-promote each other.

- Stakeholders seemed anxious to about the lack of an anchor store or destination business downtown.
- There are no coffee shops that act as social gathering spots.
- It is unclear if the existing businesses incentives are effective for downtown.
- Some facades and store fronts are tired and not well maintained.
- Redevelopment has been delayed due to the national recession and is finally starting up again.
- We heard during the SWOT that redevelopment is being driven by few and is not in sync with many.
- There is a perception about lack of parking. Some felt this was actually because directional signage is missing.
- SWOT participants believe that West Orange competes with Montclair, South Orange and several other commercial districts and malls for shoppers.

Recommendations

- Encourage restaurants to provide tables and chairs on the sidewalks for outdoor dining and help them to get the appropriate permits to do so.
- Consider creating design guidelines for your downtown to encourage better quality façade improvements and signs.
- Use your new brand consistently throughout the four areas of downtown.
- Review the existing business incentives and determine if they are meeting the needs of downtown businesses. If not, undertake research to identify other options.
- Beef up the Economic Restricting Team with people who are willing to undertake business recruitment. Review the MSNJ supplied marketing materials and the results of the Online Consumer and Stakeholder Survey when completed this winter to target a handful of businesses that would fit in available storefronts downtown.
- The Promotion Team should research and visit the competing downtowns to determine what lessons can be learned from them that would be applicable to West Orange.

External issues that DWOA can influence, but not control

Township Government, Agencies and Politics, Regulation and Ordinances

Observations

- DWOA has a high quality relationship with Township government.
- The Township is lacking of a full time urban planner.
- There were complaints about lack of zoning and code enforcement in downtown and in residential districts.
- There is no downtown shuttle or circulator to move people around the four distinct downtown areas or to and from the train station.

- Downtown is pedestrian friendly but there are some obstructions to pedestrian traffic. Some parcels downtown do not have sidewalks.
- There were concerns about crime downtown. Some noted that there is actual crime occurring in downtown, while others worried about the perception of crime.

Recommendations

- Reach out to the local police to ensure that there is more police presence downtown so people feel safe and secure. Identify downtown crime statistics and monitor them regularly, promote any positive change.
- Look into the feasibility of a downtown shuttle/jitney to the various downtown areas and to the train station. Work with the Township grant writer to identify possible funding.
- Propose a complete streets and sidewalks plan for cyclists and pedestrians to bring before the Township government.
- Work with the Township on code enforcement issues downtown. Make this an important agenda item for the Design Team.

Downtown West Orange Alliance SWOT Meeting 12/11/14

Raw notes

49 people in attendance

Strengths Green

Opportunities Blue

Weaknesses Red

Threats Orange

Organizational Issues (Internal Issues)

Downtown West Orange Alliance (DWOA) Board and Staff

- Megan (x3)
- Megan and the Board
- Enthusiastic director
- Board and Directors
- Majority of Downtown West Orange Alliance Board members have or own a business downtown
- Downtown professional board
- Energy and ideas from Megan and the volunteers
- Commitment by the Alliance to Main Street process
- Commitment
- **More funds for staff development**
- The landlord association should be a subcommittee of the Downtown Alliance, there needs to be one!
- Executive director burn out, need more volunteers
- Maintain independence from Township
- Representation from landlords on the Board

DWOA Volunteers

- Available volunteers through partnerships
- Passion throughout the community, cohesiveness
- Cohesiveness, solidarity, work as a unit
- Community participation
- **The Alliance is missing more participation from everyone**
- **More committee manpower, better delegation and more volunteers**
- **Lack of volunteers for business alliance**
- **Manpower to accelerate the projects, volunteer and paid**
- **More subgroups for working**
- **The Downtown West Orange Alliance doesn't do as much, there is a lack of volunteers**

- More business owner involvement in the Alliance as well as residents

DWOA Fundraising

- Good fiscal management
- There is a Township grant writer so maybe there could be someone looking for more grants and utilizing the grant writer
- No matching funds for façade grants, or people are not aware of them
- There is enough money but there are alternative funding sources that could assist, more public-private partnerships, sponsorship for events
- Lack of funding for the organization
- Lack of funding
- Lack of outside funding outside of state and town assessment, need membership program

DWOA Events and Activities

- Seasonal decorations
- Successful town-wide events, through Main Street
- Grant program, savings on improvements
- Shop West Orange program, it is a branding activity
- Façade grants for businesses
- Successful events
- Farmers market, Fridays in the summer, afternoon
- Joe Fagan, discover West Orange program
- Self-guided walking tours, get people walking around aside from the shopping
- Girls' night out
- Program like South Orange, Downtown after Sundown concerts at night
- Shop small program, Small Business Saturday
- Expand street fair, make it bigger
- Makers fair connected with Edison
- Look to push the farmers market more
- Innovation hall of fame
- Use of vacant storefronts for popups and an art walk
- Pop up businesses big opportunity for vacancies
- Stronger farmers market, expanded hours
- Reemphasize opportunities for pop up businesses
- Art walk and pop up stores for the empty storefronts
- Promote historic and cultural sites, tie them together
- More events in Lafayette Park
- Closing off the street for the street fair
- Lack of after school activities
- Downtown Alliance goes away, who will organize downtown?
- Reinvestment of the SID
- More activities to bring crowds downtown, more and more consistent

DWOA Communications (internal and external) and Marketing

- Informative marketing- shop local
- Use of our local cable access channel via Town Council to update the public
- The awareness brand, banners
- Brand awareness is increasing for the Downtown West Orange Alliance
- Having a visitor guide for businesses on Main Street
- Visitor guide, map
- Strategic marketing for the different downtown areas
- Mini zones: restaurant zone, Edison zone, etc.
- Social media
- Social media, having more, doing more
- Website and social media
- More PR, website like Montclair
- Website needed
- Marketing professional to identify businesses to recruit, anchors, etc.
- No downtown website
- No visitor guide
- Outreach to businesses and Alliance, clarify and advertise what already exists
- More small business websites, assist in developing and linking them to DWOA website
- Website and social media issues, want more of that web presence
- Miscommunication about SID opportunities between owner and tenant, landlord is playing the SID but how does it translate to the tenant?

External Issues

Merchants, Restaurants, Businesses and the Business Climate in Downtown

- Very proactive business support
- Support system for businesses
- We value that it is business friendly
- Restaurants- Egan's, Oak Barrel, Ethnic restaurants
- Recommend other businesses, cross promotion
- Variety of businesses
- Anchor store
- Supermarket
- Need a coffee shop that is a gathering place
- Anchor stores, book stores, places
- Draw in afterhours bar/restaurant scene
- Missing opportunity to anchor with national retailers
- Outdoor cafés more needed
- Outdoor restaurant seating more needed
- Trendy dining, need and want more
- Family friendly stores and restaurants

- Wishing for 100% occupancy
- Cross promotion between businesses
- More collaboration between businesses
- High rents are prohibitive to businesses
- We need to have like national chains to bring in more customers, at any level
- There is no reason to go downtown, lacking a destination
- Need another cultural attraction after Edison and library
- Lack of interesting restaurants
- Lack of businesses and services for middle and upper income
- No coffee spots or gathering spots
- No major supermarket
- Need more diversity in restaurants
- More incentives to bring in new businesses
- Lack of incentives, or appears that way, to bring businesses in
- Are we business friendly?
- Tech- need free Wi-Fi for downtown
- No free Wi-Fi access in downtown
- Need a strategy of a business flow to encourage traffic, bring people downtown and keep them there

Borough Government, Agencies and Politics

- Town government support
- Garbage pickup, not enough and not consistent
- Lack of a full time planner
- Lack of a town planner, full time

Borough Regulations and Ordinances

- Zoning to include commercial
- Lack of zoning enforcement, multiple homes in houses not zoned for that
- Restrictive zoning, allow more businesses, less residential
- Lack of a plan
- Zoning for more density
- Density (potential customers)

Image of Downtown and Safety

- Downtown is safe
- Cleanliness
- History, in general
- Long history
- History
- Different facilities
- Various activities for families: pool and Colgate
- Pool

- Branding the special four areas, increase that branding and take advantage of the historical side of it
- Coffee with a cop program is starting up, opportunity to deal with perceptions of safety
- The state guards and security at the Edison Historic site makes the area feel safe, find a way to increase that presence on the weekends and after hours
- More walking police presence for walking safety
- Perception of downtown, communication issue
- Perception that certain areas are for certain people
- Perception of crime and quality of life issues
- Perception of crime and safety
- Perception of downtown is negative
- Perception, if you go downtown you are going to get beat up or robbed;
- Parking even though there is plenty- can't find it, etc.,
- Some neighborhoods are for "some people only" new immigrant groups moving in
- Downtown is really four distinct areas
- Missing a cohesive Main Street factor, to unify
- Need for gentrification on Main Street
- Perception that Main Street is invisible to the rest of the Township
- Need to have one main street
- Length of the corridor
- Long corridor, a lot of real estate to work with
- Ensure that there is more police presence downtown so people feel safe and secure
- Night time safety, maybe just perception
- Threat of existing crime, there is some crime

Pedestrian Conditions, Way finding and Bicycles

- Very pedestrian friendly
- Bring in new business for a walkable downtown
- Need for downtown shuttle and map
- Complete street policy
- Livable walkable community
- Lack of lighting and sidewalks for pedestrian accessibility
- Complete streets for cyclists and pedestrians
- Few sidewalks
- Prism project obstructs pedestrian flow of shopping
- Easy pedestrian access, need more and more consistent
- Pedestrian friendly
- More signage
- Maintain public access in redevelopment zone (walkway)

Streetscape, the Urban Environment and local transportation

- Public transportation, buses on Main Street
- Nice lighting

- Beautiful cherry blossoms along Main Street
- Need a transit loop or something like a shuttle
- Transit update, more transit to train station, etc.
- Improve the streetscape
- Giving face lifts to business facades
- Having more tables and chairs on the sidewalks to dine outside
- Design uniformity to bring together the four different downtown areas
- Need a town-wide shuttle, especially to trains, make it easier to access NYC
- No shuttle to train station
- Buses and pub transportation, lack thereof
- No consistency in facades and the way store fronts look
- Facades, signs, and awnings need upgrades
- Facelift to building facades
- Overall look of the downtown, looks tired
- Lack of funding to improve streetscape
- Lack of transit hub

Downtown Development, Housing and Parking Issues

- Vacancies, some blank canvas
- Arts districts
- Defunct economic development commission, needs to be revitalized
- Missing teeth, pulling redevelopment to curbside
- Addressing parking
- Street signage,
- Having the lines repainted so that it seems fresh, especially delineating parking
- Parking issues, maybe build a structure, more parking in front versus parking in rear
- Infill development
- Redevelopment
- An artist's district, craft fair
- Develop a recreation center
- Blank canvas opportunity
- Return to urban areas
- More housing, more rentals
- Historical housing, more housing
- Redevelopment
- Outdoor gathering places
- More consolidated mixed use shopping areas
- More living in downtown, making sure that there is enough shuttles to train station, take people to NYC
- Connection between entire township's recreational facilities and connect to downtown
- Perception of lack of parking with easy access to stores
- Lack of signage directing to parking
- Perception of lack of parking

- Speed of development for Prism project
- Redevelopment stagnant
- No new developments, it isn't happening- need more
- Redevelopment has been stagnant for too long
- More middle and upper income housing
- Upgrading the residential, mix of income levels (need more variety)
- Main Street was industrial, needs to be updated to keep up with Montclair and others
- Redeveloper plan is not in sync with the community
- Failed redevelopment, if that happens
- Gridlock in moving development forward, the longer it takes the more it costs and the more people you lose
- What is redevelopment falls through?
- No commercial development strategy or leader
- Redevelopment is being driven by few and is not in sync with many
- Other towns are moving faster with their redevelopment
- Prism project

Access, Proximity and Regional Connections

- Transportation, corridor, proximity to 280
- Easy access to Main Street from I-280
- The fact that we consider it a corridor, a throughway
- Proximity to route 208- highway access
- Proximity to 280
- Traffic congestion
- Too much traffic in downtown
- Traffic choke points, access in and out of town
- Traffic pattern, concern that cars are just passing through

External Partnerships with Borough, other Towns, schools, and sites

- The Edison museum site
- Edison museum site
- Edison site
- Edison Museum
- Thomas Edison National Historic Site
- Community house on Main Street
- National Park on Main Street
- Proximity to some high income towns: Glen Ridge, Montclair
- Start of new partnerships between Downtown West Orange Alliance, West Orange Chamber of Commerce, and others
- West Orange public library
- Expanding the outreach of the historic site
- Thomas Edison site is a great draw but they are lacking something to partner with it, like a West Orange Museum

- The Luna Stage on Valley Road should be brought into the Alliance
- Joining STEM with the library or the Edison museum
- Montclair and South Orange are almost full, so West Orange might be the next stop
- Edison museum to create a buzz for downtown
- Tying in with all of the green technology, related to Edison and Tesla, etc.
- Attract from around West Orange, artists live/work spaces
- Promote Green tech and Edison
- Other destinations there are even closer, shopping centers and stores within West Orange outside of downtown
- External competition from surrounding towns
- Competing downtowns take from West Orange
- External threats: Montclair, South Orange
- Competing downtowns- South Orange, Montclair, Livingston Mall, Essex Green
- Competition from neighboring downtowns

Demographics

- Downtown West Orange cares, in general
- Engaged citizens
- We are special
- Diversity
- The inclusivity, including everyone in town
- Cultural diversity in town and how they let it develop, new groups are accepted
- As a resident, I talk to other people about events that I am going to
- Nothing for young people to do in West Orange teens up to young families
- More opportunities to know the Spanish community
- Perception of a cultural divide, language barrier with Hispanic community but could easily be a great resource
- Reclaiming youth demographic, losing a whole section of population