

CITY OF MILFORD
COUNCIL WORKSHOP MINUTES
April 17, 2023

The City Council of the City of Milford convened in a Workshop Session on Monday, April 17, 2023, beginning at 6:11 p.m.

PRESIDING: Mayor Archie Campbell

IN ATTENDANCE: Councilpersons Dan Marabello, Mike Boyle, Andrew Fulton, Todd Culotta, Brian Baer, Jason James Sr., and Katrina Wilson

STAFF: City Manager Mark Whitfield and City Clerk Terri Hudson

COUNSEL: Solicitor David Rutt, Esquire

ABSENT: Councilmember Nirmala Samaroo

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD PRIOR TO MEETING

Because no one registered to speak, the public comment session was not needed.

City of Milford Strategic Plan Update

Institute for Public Administration Senior Fellow William McGowan and Assistant Policy Scientist Chase Barnes were in attendance to collaborate with the Mayor and City Council to finalize the city's strategic plan update.

Dr. McGowan provided a synopsis of the process that has occurred over the past six months. Four community conversations were held beginning from November 2022 through February 2023.

Comments received were as follows:

Growth – Growth is a major concern of all residents and is a contributing factor to an emerging identity challenge. Residents want to see more controlled growth and limited sprawl. However, they also want more amenities.

He suggests looking at the deeper issue. Milford is in decent shape, but there is a need to pay attention to what the city is doing, because the residents are paying attention and want growth but controlled and reasonable.

Housing is directly tied to growth. There should be a variety of housing options available. But the price of new and existing housing stock is a major concern to people. People living here have major skepticism about the role developers play in determining what is being done in the community and the type of housing that is available.

Dr. McGowan pointed out that housing is a huge issue in every small town, and mainly because people cannot afford it. Concerns about what it will look like, how it will be taken care of are significant. Housing in Milford is not just a place to live but also speaks to the character of the town. Milford remains an attractive town, and still has trees and beautiful architecture, but there is a need to pay closer attention, because all that can go away.

There are always issues with the development community and residents mentioned this several times during the conversations.

Folks are going to look at code enforcement to make sure they are doing their jobs. There is a great concern about littering in Milford and that does not seem to be getting the attention they want it to have.

People also want more activities and amenities. Milford just hired a youth program coordinator, and there is a need to keep the younger residents engaged by providing things to do for both Milford's youth and the adults. He agrees that is a large

piece of a successful community and emphasized the importance of showing up at sporting events, going to the theater, and even walking on the riverwalk or downtown.

Residents would like to see a better mix of businesses in Milford. More opportunities for a variety of jobs and talents.

Some of the challenges of the downtown area include homelessness, lack of connectivity to the larger region, the presence of the state agencies, lack of parking, and a slow business permitting process. The current lack of jobs situation is seen as a deterrent to people, especially the younger population.

The City needs to embrace healthcare, industry, and culture to be able to increase economic development.

People spoke honestly and admitted they are coming to Milford because it is a cheap place to live. They are not coming to this community because they want to live, work, and play here. They want to come here and live, but then they admitted they will go to the beach and do other things. Milford is in a location that is easily accessible to other towns and states.

When asked about seniors moving to Milford, Mr. McGowen said Milford is not 'yet' a retirement community. Retirees are coming to Milford to live but are going to other places to spend their money. On the other hand, the people that come to Milford and spend money come from the west—typically Harrington, Felton, and Greenwood.

Other major safety issues mentioned by residents were high rates of youth crime, lack of community policing, homelessness, and code enforcement.

He commented that the new police chief comes from Wilmington and has a strong community policing background. Mr. McGowen pointed out that the real community policing philosophy comes with a whole new language. The community wants our police to be fully engaged and prefer to see those officers everywhere including in their neighborhoods, downtown, riverwalk, and public events. They want a lot more community outreach like a police athletic league. Residents want these officers to be seen and more involved with our youth.

Residents also want to see better lighting both downtown and in their neighborhoods.

Most residents felt comfortable driving and walking around Milford.

There was a lot of interest expressed in cycling. However, residents are uncomfortable using the current streets and roadways without separate bike facilities. Many of their concerns involved heavy truck traffic and congested intersections. There needs to be much more focus on transportation options. Ways are needed to connect Milford with the larger community/regional destinations, such as DE Turf and Bayhealth Campus.

Milford also needs to find ways to capture the market that attends DE Turf. Ways to reach the huge crowds at the complex is desperately needed. Those attendees need to be directed to Milford and get them to return.

Residents are skeptical whether streets in developments are being properly graded and repaved when construction concludes. Some appear unfinished with little or no pressure from the city.

Most residents rate Milford's infrastructure as good and dependable, especially snow removal. Concerns include expanded gas service, lack of internet service provider competition, and the effectiveness of solid-waste removal.

Residents are also acutely aware that increased development might strain city resources when it comes to infrastructure. City reassurance that essential infrastructure is properly secured from vandalism and domestic terrorism is crucial.

Most residents recognize the positive attributes of the city and its government. However, there are many areas they feel could be improved including better communications, greater variety of mediums, and more frequent sharing of success stories.

Having in-person resources available at centralized locations is vital to most residents.

Civic participation and volunteerism is a priority to most residents and there are little or no communication when it comes to learning about potential opportunities. Most of the people in attendance at the community conversations want to get involved, but they also understand the difficulty in getting people to show up and participate.

Community engagement was discussed and what it really understands. There is need to get people engaged, but Mr. McGowen emphasized the importance of listening to Milford's residents and showing them, they have been heard.

He suggests doing more than having the Economic Development Administrator send out blips to citizens. He feels there is a need to talk more about this and work is needed in this area before Milford becomes a successful community.

Concluding with the ideas and thoughts resulting from the community conversations, it was determined that Milford is at an identity crossroads with different opinions about the vision of Milford's future emerging between newer residents and legacy residents.

Updates to the current strategic plan was then discussed.

The overall summary is Milford is a well-managed city with solid fiscal and operational policies and implementation. Milford is at a critical identity crossroads. It is a destination because of its location near the resorts, affordable costs, and small-town feel. It is not a destination recognized as a place to live, work and play. Residents of Milford want to participate in their community at all levels from arts, entertainment, parks, and recreation to a deeper engagement with each other and how the city grows. The downtown and surrounding core city is a vital part of the character of Milford

Recommended are three plan changes. Separate community engagement from fiscal responsibility, creating six priority areas. Focus more attention on implementation of the downtown river plan and bicycle and pedestrian plan. Add an easy-to-use matrix as a pathway to progress for community use.

When speaking to public community engagement, it is embedded in each of the plans. Mr. McGowen believe it is important enough to pull it out and talk about it directly.

A new page will be added to the downtown river plan and a page to the bike and ped plan. What is in the current plan is implemented in the downtown river plan. That does not cut it, and it is important to add how do you know where you are, who is doing the job, and what is getting done. The same applies to the bike and ped plan.

A matrix is in place, but it is entirely too detailed. Instead, an easy-to-use matrix should be used as a pathway for the community to use to track progress. Having to go through twenty-three different boxes to determine the status of a project is unsuitable.

The matrix was reviewed and the highlights of what has been done in the past five years was pulled out. Those accomplishments include:

Conducted a retreat to build and strengthen cohesiveness and communication among council members and staff.

Developed belief statements for each priority area.

Construction of a police station with an estimated completion of October 2023.

Hired a police chief and several officers with effort to fully staff the department.

Accepted plan to adjust and add fire siren locations.

Adoption of an emergency management plan and designation of an emergency management director.

Purchase of property for a new industrial park. Hired an economic development and community engagement administrator.

Created a checklist for how to start and conduct a business in Milford.

Adopted the Bicycle Master Plan. Updated and continually monitor sidewalk status.

Updated the city building code. Developed a checklist for landlords and homeowners on property upkeep.

Construction of pickleball courts, playground, and restrooms for Memorial Park with anticipated completion Fall of 2023.

Hired a Parks and Recreation Program Coordinator.

Farmer's Market to continue.

Conducted the second National Citizen Survey.

Completed a utility rate study and updated the 5-year rate plan.

Developed a cash reserve policy.

Council discussed ways to get people to participate, as well as finding out residents' interest. Survey participation and the pros and cons were considered.

Mr. McGowen recalled discussing the Harwood Center for Public Innovation and where the community is within the community rhythms. There is another list called nine elements of public capital that include intangible elements of a community surrounding places where people can gather and have fun. As such, is there a safe place for leaders to discuss things, are there informal networks, etc. Those are not embedded in the plan but added to share them. If a community is well-managed and fiscally responsible, it is council's task to climb to another level. That is how to get our citizens to live and love and 'want' to be in Milford, though that is difficult.

When compared to the effective volunteerism in Lewes, the challenge in Milford is to reach the working residents and the new residents coming from New York and New Jersey, and get them to buy in, chip in and make it happen. At the same time, there is a need to take care of the folks that are home.

The new priority is community engagement and Council identified the following belief statements:

- We believe in all residents volunteering for the betterment of the city.
- We believe city government is open, transparent, and engaging.
- We believe constant citizen contact will lead to better governance.
- We believe community events are vital to the wellbeing of the city.

Demographic data was examined and the importance of understanding the variables in the overall community to be successful. It was agreed that community events bring people together. Community events are perfect for promoting positive change, and there's opportunity for improvement in every community.

Councilman James pointed out that without economic development, the events do not have the draw. He thinks more needs to be done to attract the various groups.

The importance of good education and a sound school system is significant to attract new families.

Councilmember Culotta said it begins with economic development. He believes that the business portion and that investment in the city creates better housing, creates better events, which then creates better schooling. He pointed out that the city borrowed money from its own coffers to buy the land for the new business park. He asked where we with that are and believes that should be the city's laser focus.

He continued by stating he and Councilmember Boyle lived in Northern Virginia and they have seen growth there. That was the result of economic input and well-paying jobs.

Mr. McGowen then talked about the community engagement goals and building an open, transparent, and engaged dialogue between the city government and the Milford community.

Objective 1

- Build and maintain regular and timely communications with community members about the City's activities, programs, and services.

Strategies

- Continue to broaden the city's communication channels to include a wider range of print, email, social media, radio/tv, and in person opportunities.
- Increase frequency of opportunities to listen and engage community members.
- Consider surveying residents to assess the best way to communicate with them.
- Give particular focus to promoting recreational opportunities, emergency preparedness, community events, development, and city achievements.

Objective 2

- Promote community participation in all aspects of city life.
- Strategies
- Create a central hub for information on volunteer opportunities and contact information.
- Create ways of recognizing community volunteers and activists.
- Investigate ways to incorporate creative placemaking principles to develop the arts in Milford.

Objective 3

- Develop monthly community events to engage the community and attract visitors to the city.
- Strategies
- Expand community festivals and establish new events, such as a concert series and art loop.

Some of the existing objectives and strategies will remain in the strategic plan. There will be subtle changes and one or two may be removed and a couple added.

Regarding public safety and preparedness, the following belief statements were reviewed and the most important items:

- We believe in a fully diverse staff and professionally trained police force
- We believe in a properly funded and staffed police force and emergency services to meet future growth of the city
- We believe that mutual trust exists between the police and residents

Minor updates:

- Added objective on Homelessness (came up throughout the conversations):

Objective 3 - Expand the city's efforts and capacity to address homelessness.

Strategies

- Partner with state agencies and towns to identify and implement best practices
- Explore the feasibility of innovative housing solutions, such as pallet housing, e.g., Georgetown, Salisbury, MD
- Continue to build and expand partnerships with organizations who serve the homeless population.
- Promote opportunities for residents to volunteer in assisting this population

Under economic health and development:

- We believe in the creation of higher paying jobs and career opportunities (focus on medical industry and related fields)
- We believe in a strong economic policy based on well thought out regulations
- We believe in attracting companies with strong potential for growth that will enhance Milford's future

- We believe in high quality amenities including beautification will establish excellent quality of life for residents while maintaining the unique characteristics of the city

Minor changes:

- Added page on Downtown Plan
- Revised Objective on Tourism

The Downtown River Plan was written in 2015 which is seven years old. It is time for that to be looked at again. Mr. McGowen suggests raising the level of the relationship between Downtown Milford (DMI) and the city. DMI is focused on one of the city's engines, and there is a need for the city to be there for them in a big way.

GOAL: Bring More Tourism to Milford

Objective 1

- Actively promote tourism opportunities through arts, culture, and eco-tourism in Milford, to bring in visitors and provide residents with more recreational options.

Strategies

- Expand community festivals and establish new events, such as a concert series and art loop.
- Advertise on print, radio/tv, social media, other Delaware park webpages, etc.
- Continue to pursue creative methods of promoting City events, such as street banners.
- Provide amenities such as public bathrooms that support tourism.

Councilwoman Wilson pointed out that in addition to the downtown, there is a need to focus on our shopping centers and other commercial areas.

Mr. McGowen reiterated the bike and ped plan kept coming back. The bike plan has been adopted and that page will be added.

Items related to mobility and infrastructure:

- We believe all residents need equal access to broadband
- We believe in a well-planned, walkable city
- We believe in well-maintained and well-planned infrastructure to meet future needs
- We believe all residents have access to alternate transportation

Minor changes:

- Add a page on Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan
- Added Promote See, Click, Fix.
- Changed Council updates to semi-annual
- Added strategy "Ensure regulations are updated to comply with recommendations in the comprehensive plan."

Objective 4 - Implement the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan

Strategies

- Implement high value standalone road projects and intersection improvements based on impact
- Collaborate with Kent County, Sussex County, nearby local governments, DelDOT, Dover-Kent MPO, and the University of Delaware to develop regional bicycle routes

Councilmember Fulton suggested adding the Transportation Improvement District (TID) and some of items on the August 19, 2023 Workshop be added in relation to the Downtown Development District. Council agreed.

The Neighborhoods and community services involve

- We believe all residents and business take pride in our City (overlap with econ dev)

- We believe all residents have equal access to City services (overlap with infrastructure)
- We believe all residents of all ages have access to open space and recreational opportunities
- We believe all residents have an equal voice in their governance (overlap with community engagement)
- We believe all neighborhoods will have interconnectivity with each other

Minor changes:

- Added strategies to encourage partnerships

Strategies

- Continue to partner with external organizations to gain access to more outdoor and indoor facilities for adult and child sports leagues.
- Build capacity of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board consisting of residents to advise City Council, expand outreach, and recruit volunteers.
- Expand access to existing regional recreational amenities through varied transportation options.
- Work with residents and partners to create a recreational scholarship or subsidy for families who struggle to pay program fees.

Council agreed we are moving in the right direction.

Mr. Barnes shared that the groups were a good mix of ages though there could have been a little more representation of families with children, though that is a difficult group to tap into in the evenings. High school age youth were not in attendance as well.

Mr. McGowen pointed out that Milford, in general, is in a good place. But now it is time to get serious about helping people own this community. The school district is Milford's future and there is a need to engage the middle and high school students and find a way to attract them.

Councilmember James pointed out that Milford School District is currently working on their own five-year strategic plan. One of the things that they are speaking of being highly interested in is being able to get the eighth grader and older more engaged in the community, as part of their overall rounding of their educational experience. This is a great time to partner with them because of that.

It was agreed that once the introduction pages are reviewed, it is only a six or seven-page document.

Mr. McGowen also emphasized the need for an easy-to-use matrix in the plan that could be updated on a regular basis.

He then asked Council if they need the strategies or just the goal/objective with an update.

Councilmember Fulton prefers the goals/objectives, in addition to the timeline of completion. This ensures something is being done and those things are happening. Councilmember James agreed, then referenced the preset milestones, and asked what the milestones are and what things Council expects progress on at certain points in time though it could be fluid due to early completions or delays.

It was agreed that builds accountability and transparency.

An extended conversation regarding the number of projects the city has accomplished and the next things that are going to happen.

Mr. Barnes suggested removing the strategy section. The updates would then become the progress of the goals and objectives per year. Councilmember James then added the milestone markers that measure the progress of the goals and objectives.

Summarizing, the plan is to keep the goals, objectives and add some type of benchmark or milestone and a space for progress.

Mr. McGowen then reviewed the underlying conditions of public capital factors.

The underlying conditions of a community, or public capital factors, includes nine factors—the capacities, relationships, networks, and norms that enable a community to work effectively.

These underlying conditions enable communities to work and progress through the five stages of community life. While many communities lack these conditions, the good news is that we can create them through our intentional actions. The nine factors operate as an ecosystem—each factor is independent and interdependent.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
Abundance of Social Gathering Places	These enable people to learn about what is happening in the community and begin to develop a sense of mutual trust.
Organized Spaces for Interaction	Where people can come together to learn about, discuss, and often act on community problems. These spaces help a community begin to identify and tap existing resources—and at times, new resources to address common concerns.
Catalytic Organizations	That help engage people in public life, spur discussion on community challenges and marshal the community’s resources to move ahead. These organizations help lay the foundation for action, but do not act as the driving force.
Safe Havens for Decision Makers	Where a community’s leaders can deliberate and work through community concerns in “unofficial,” candid discussions
Strong, Diverse Leadership	That exists at all layers of a community, understands the concerns of the community as a whole, and serves as a connector among individuals and organizations throughout the community.
Informal Networks and Links	That connect various individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions together to create a cross fertilization effect of experience, knowledge, and resources.

Conscious Community Discussion	Where a community has many opportunities to think about and sort through its public concerns before acting. People play an active role in helping decide how the community should act.
Community Norms for Public Life	That help guide how people act individually, interact and work together. These norms set the standards and tone for civic engagement.
A Shared Purpose for the Community	That sends an explicit message about the community's aspirations and conveys a sense of "we're in this together."

The next step will be for Mr. McGowen and Mr. Barnes to incorporate Council comments. Additional thoughts or suggestions around the matrix should be sent to them, in addition to any other sidebar. They will then finalize the plan.

In the meantime, the strategic plan needs to be posted and advertised and dates established for the tentative public hearing and adoption potentially in June.

Council agreed the public hearing is critical in the process and they look forward to hearing any comments.

There being no further business, the Council Workshop concluded at 7:49 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Terri K. Hudson, MMC
City Clerk/Recorder