

**To: Mark Hetrick & Julie Spriggs, Town of Zebulon**  
**From: Chad Meadows, CodeWright Planners**  
**Date: September 18, 2017**  
**RE: Downtown Focus Group Meeting #1 Summary**

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On Tuesday, September 12, 2017 from 6:30 to 8:30 PM, CodeWright conducted the first of three focus group meetings with the Downtown Focus Group. Seven stakeholders attended the meeting. Six are business owners; all work downtown. Several either have recently or are preparing to perform renovations on a building downtown. Attendees included:

*Downtown Focus Group Members*

Brian Bullock  
Nelle Carroll  
John Muter  
Prior Myrick  
Dallas Pearce  
Derek Pruitt  
Lesley Richards

*Town Staff and Consultants*

Joe Moore  
Donald Horton  
Mark Hetrick  
Julie Spriggs  
Mackenzie Day  
Chad Meadows  
Cara Isher-Witt

Following a short presentation that introduced the project's history, goals, and outcomes, focus group members were given the opportunity to respond, round-robin style, to three questions: What are downtown's key challenges? What is positive about downtown? and Anything else the project team should know?

The focus group's collective responses to each of the questions follow. Similar or related comments have been grouped according to topic, and the topics are presented in no particular order.

### **Key Challenges for Downtown Zebulon:**

Focus group members identified ten areas that pose key challenges for the revitalization of downtown Zebulon:

#### **1. Traffic**

There is heavy and fast-moving traffic on Arendell and on Vance, but not the kind of traffic that stops to shop downtown. Large truck traffic is particularly disruptive to the feel of downtown.

#### **2. Pedestrian-friendliness**

Traffic speeds and lack of pedestrian facilities discourage walking downtown. There is a desire to see more people parking and walking from business to business downtown. While there are a few new benches downtown, focus group members would like to see more pedestrian amenities like benches and landscaping.

#### **3. Need for a downtown "draw"**

Focus group members expressed that downtown lacks a major "draw" that would bring in customers in larger numbers. There was a feeling expressed that people are so used to downtown being vacant that they don't look around when they drive past.

To achieve this, downtown needs to both have more businesses overall and a greater range of businesses that would attract different people and serve whole families. In particular, there is a

need for nightlife. This represents a missed opportunity for businesses to get foot traffic in the evenings. Another major need expressed was for family-friendly activities and businesses.

Other ideas for improving the “draw” of downtown was to promote outdoor dining at downtown restaurants and additional spaces to hold downtown events.

#### **4. Vacant and/or poorly maintained buildings**

Focus group members reported that there are many properties (most vacant but some in use) that are not being properly maintained. This means that it is difficult to find a property to rent downtown that is both affordable and in good condition. Some of the derelict buildings are nearby or attached to other buildings and are threatening them.

Focus group members expressed a need for a minimum maintenance code and/or safety code for downtown buildings.

Group members noted that historic buildings difficult to maintain, and it is impossible for business or property owners to do aesthetic upgrades when basic structural repairs are needed as well.

#### **5. Appearance issues with existing businesses**

Focus group members expressed that there are several downtown businesses that are not maintaining their storefronts – including windows covered in advertisements and visible trash inside and outside buildings. Some of these issues are covered by current codes, but are not being enforced.

There is a need for a minimum threshold of appearance for businesses.

#### **6. Need for downtown residential uses**

Focus group members said that they would like to have people living downtown so that there are ready customers for downtown businesses. In particular, the need to attract younger residents was raised.

One person expressed interest in renovating a building to be a mixed-use second-story residential project downtown, but expressed concern the code would not allow this to be easily done. Developers need the code to be less restrictive on mixed use downtown.

#### **7. Parking**

There were mixed views on parking issues downtown. One attendee said that parking is not currently a problem, but will be in the future as downtown grows. There were also worries that a perceived lack of parking discourages people from visiting downtown. One person suggested that the parallel spaces are not the proper format for downtown parking, and suggested the Town consider angled spaces instead.

One focus group member raised a related concern that during downtown events, out of town customers end up parked in or unable to navigate around blocked streets.

## 8. Safety concerns

Some Focus group members voiced concerns with perceptions of illegal activity happening in and around businesses downtown and reported community perceptions that it is not safe to go downtown at certain times of the day.

## 9. Code-specific concerns

Several focus group members voiced frustration with working with the building and zoning codes in trying to bring buildings up to code to be usable. The group discussed that the building code is State-mandated and cannot be changed through this project, but noted that the Town is using the rehabilitation code to try to address the difficulties of working with historic buildings.

In terms of the UDO, focus group members expressed a desire for a developer-friendly code that would not needlessly hamper downtown revitalization. One focus group member noted that at times, downtown rezonings have been unpredictable, and called for the updated UDO to recognize downtown's desired urban context when establishing noise and other standards.

## 10. Infrastructure

Two focus group members expressed that it is difficult for developers with downtown interests to access information about water and sewer infrastructure. Clarity is needed on where water and sewer is available and how developers may access it.

## What Is Positive About Downtown?

Focus group members named a range of positive aspects of downtown:

1. Town parking lot, which provides off-street parking serving multiple businesses;
2. Charming small-town feel and appearance;
3. Layout of downtown's small, compact blocks;
4. Historic building stock that represents great development potential;
5. Friendly Town staff, police, Chamber of Commerce, women's club, new Downtown Arts Council – everyone is welcoming and helpful to new business owners;
6. There is a feeling of consensus that everyone wants to see downtown take off; and
7. Staple businesses that serve as landmarks downtown, including Whitley's and Debnam's.

## Other Comments:

The following were additional comments from focus group members:

1. The Town is generally helpful to people wanting to develop or remodel, but property owners still need a big budget to get the complete most jobs.
2. The Town doesn't have a BID or a downtown association currently. There was interest in exploring this as an option for downtown revitalization beyond the UDO in the future.
3. Downtown business and property owners would benefit from grants/assistance to make necessary interior repairs (beyond façade grants).
4. Focus group members reiterated the need for a minimum maintenance code, particularly for structures that pose a danger to health and safety and which share a party wall with another building or business.