

**This is a summary of the notes taken during each of the four Focus Groups. Audio recordings are also available on the Google Drive.**

## **Conservation and Natural Resources**

### Strengths – What are South Berwick’s strengths?

1. Very engaged citizenry
  - a. Leaders in conservation of municipal land
2. Large number of wetlands- general prevalence of diverse & important ecosystems
  - a. Wetlands provide many “ecosystem services”, filtration, water quality
3. Existing Relationships
  - a. GWRLT
  - b. Local government
  - c. State government
  - d. Federal government
4. Habitat diversity
  - a. Also NH
5. Diversity of residents
  - a. Hunters, recreators, passive recreators
6. Conserved land, parks, etc. means residents have a place to go
7. Trails and recreation
8. Adds to quality of life
  - a. Open space contributes to character of the town
9. Large contiguous forest areas
  - a. Access to public lands
10. Great marketing tool to attract new residents and businesses

### Weaknesses/Threats – What are challenges? Areas of concern?

1. PFAs? Issue is still very unknown, where will funding come from, who are the players
- 2. Water quality**
  - a. Protection of uplands and headwaters**
  - b. Development pressures**
3. Balancing landowner rights
  - a. Flexibility in zoning
  - b. Incentives for land stewardship
4. Growth in rural parts of town
5. Flooding is mostly in roads, not a tidal issue
  - a. Also some basements near wetlands or lowlands
- 6. Sewer treatment plant is in future flood areas**
  - a. Other stormwater infrastructure is out of date, over capacity in storms**
7. Budgets, cost of maintenance and acquisition
- 8. Conservation causes Land/Home values to increase, prices become not inclusive for everyone.**
  - a. Disadvantage the next generation

9. Getting decision makers to use past plans and follow recommendations
10. Experienced and engaged volunteers are hard to find
11. Communication breakdowns
  - a. Conservation commission missing invites to meetings/site walks, as an example
12. Conservation/Natural Resources is not a focus or priority of boards
- 13. Huge reliance on land trust; close the gap between town and trust**
- 14. We need tools that combine conservation and affordable housing**
  - a. **Who/what are the resources, players, funders**
15. Parking can be an issue, Traffic and increased visitors to public lands/space
16. How are opportunities/assets marketed?
17. Making connections across borders
  - a. York, Elliot, and Berwick access
18. Growth pressures vs. capacity of resources
  - a. Development meaning risk of losing habitat
19. Climate change concerns mean thinking about habitat, water/aquatic connectivity, and land functions

#### What's next? – Opportunities for moving forward

1. Impact fees for conservation funds
  - a. Would this hurt the effort for affordable housing? Maybe create an exception for affordable units
- 2. Town contributes to the cost of purchasing land**
  - a. **Makes affordable housing more feasible**
  - b. **Goes back to tools to combine conservation and affordable housing**
- 3. Zoning for water quality (beyond SL zones)**
  - a. **Requiring wetland values and functions assessment for new development**
4. Higher priority in Comprehensive plan and open space plan
  - a. Plans must have implementation guidelines/steps
5. Creating structure for cluster subdivisions, open space
  - a. Who maintains it?
  - b. Can it be required?
- 6. Creating a better process for zoning amendments, developing focus**
- 7. Flexibility in zoning; responsive and relevant and reflective**
- 8. Being creative with partnerships and goals of a project**
- 9. Now is the time to think on climate change**
- 10. Can we site solar on PFAs contaminated soil?**

#### Takeaways

11. Need to strike a balance between development pressure and preserving natural resources
- 12. Water quality concerns**
  - a. **Wetland functions and values assessments**
  - b. May need stronger zoning
  - c. Flooding and stormwater issues

13. Abundant conserved lands have strong influence on land and home value
  - a. Can be good or bad
  - b. Affordable housing has to be managed effectively with rising home values
    - i. Also environmental impact fees
14. Better zoning process with flexibility for homeowners
15. Close the gap between town and land trusts

## Economic Development

### Strengths – What are South Berwick’s strengths?

1. Residents generally have decently well-paying jobs, willing to spend money
2. Bringing in new Economic Development Director
3. Strong sense of community
4. Location on seacoast, nearby airports, access to I95, etc., appealing town
5. Inn provides a place to stay, small town destination.
6. Good recreation assets
7. **Traffic through community brings patrons** (can be good and bad)
8. Free parking available
9. **Village with history**
10. Areas ready for growth
11. Good anchors businesses at Punkintown area
12. Town is starting to think strategically now about economic development
13. There are more businesses than it appears
14. A lot of available land on Route 236
15. Other areas are getting overpriced/busy; potential to absorb excess growth from elsewhere.
16. Up against NH
17. Lack of workforce, more of a challenge post-pandemic

### Weaknesses/Threats – What are challenges? Areas of concern?

1. Need a clearer vision for future – what areas are most suited for development?
2. Small town, feeling of having maxed out total potential customers
3. **Traffic**
  - a. Negatively impacts walkability
  - b. Perceived parking problem, no awareness
  - c. Difficulty finding spots that are unmetered
  - d. Causes residents to avoid downtown
4. Business Retention
  - a. Do some things need to be a chain to be successful?
5. Need more essential services
6. Housing/workforce housing
  - a. In-migration driving up costs
7. Commuting time
8. Sensitivity of & increased state regulations compared to NH, can be politically difficult
9. No real public transit.
10. Expanding TIF districts but not capturing taxes.
11. **Lack of strategy**
12. **No marketing; lack of information**
13. **Planning for future, market analysis needed.**

### What’s next? – Opportunities for moving forward

## 1. Downtown Revitalization Plan and Market Analysis

### a. Façade improvements

- i. Clean and attractive, incorporate history (Kennebunk as example)
- ii. Flowers, streetlights
- iii. Community spaces

### b. Lower Main Street & 236 opportunities

- i. Opportunity for essential services businesses
  1. Pharmacy
  2. Hardware store
  3. Gym/sports and athletics area
  4. Grocery store
2. Mill sold nearby in NH – where will those businesses go?
3. Better understand why folks aren't stopping? **Awareness, marketing the destination, branding.**
4. When businesses change hands, opportunity to the town to make connections.

## Takeaways

1. Traffic is both good and bad.
  - a. Good for creating awareness of community opportunities, bringing in customers/employees/residents.
  - b. Bad for commuting time, walkability, putting pressure on parking resources.
  - c. Made worse by lack of public transit and poor walkability.
2. Parking is competitive.
  - a. Free parking is available but difficult to find.
3. Downtown revitalization plan should include improving aesthetic appeal and promoting essential light industry businesses.
4. **Marketing analysis is needed.**
  - a. Assess current and future opportunities for businesses.

## Land Use and Housing

### Strengths - What are South Berwick's strengths?

1. **Current Breakdown of districts is well thought out**
  - a. Some ambiguous areas
2. **Having a Village & functional downtown area is a big draw**
3. **Public open space**
4. Good expertise on P.B. and other town government
5. More diversity of housing types than surrounding communities
6. Green space
7. Senior housing
8. Multiple housing types mixed together in zoning
9. Quintessential downtown, schools close to downtown
  - a. More vibrant and diverse
  - b. More walkable and practical
10. Proximity to major markets

### Weaknesses/Threats – What are challenges? Areas of concern?

1. Some ambiguity in zones, needs clarity
  - a. Better clarity would support more informed decision-making by board
2. Defining a future vision
  - a. Inconsistent at times
  - b. Growth vs open space
3. How does water/sewer expand?
  - a. What is the future capacity of the water supply? (decision-making concern)
4. Possible that zoning ordinance is heavy on residential zoning?
5. Need to better understand and prepare for LD2003
6. **Zoning is out of date and needs re-evaluation**
7. Outdated infrastructure
  - a. Solid waste issues
8. Managing public spaces with growth
9. Accountability of decision makers
10. Tools for flexibility with new uses
  - a. Unexpected uses?
  - b. Contract zones?
  - c. New uses (Tiny home park?)
    - i. Are we prepared?
11. Need to better understand what other barriers to development need to be addressed
  - a. Uses that are not defined in the ordinance
  - b. Parking requirements
  - c. Roads and infrastructure
    - i. Cost to update
12. Diversity of future commercial development

13. Missing a 3<sup>rd</sup> place (outside of home & school) for teens- bowling? arcade? movies?
14. Some poor housing conditions, façade improvements downtown?

#### What's next? – Opportunities for moving forward

1. **Pursue commercial pods along 236**
2. **Market analysis**
3. Understanding growth will happen, **let's try to shape it**
4. **Mitigating LD2003**
5. **Zoning ordinance revisions based on discussion (Seconded by many)**
6. Consider rent contract/inclusionary zoning
7. AirBnB rules
8. Deal with traffic
  - a. Changes character of town
9. Flexibility of zoning
10. Economics of housing
  - a. Increasing density = more cost to town
11. Workforce/affordability of housing/quality
12. Agriculture land preservation
  - a. Take action with an agriculture commission
13. Smaller homes trend opportunity
14. Public transit/planning bike lanes
15. Special topic committees

#### Takeaways

1. Spruce up downtown
2. Zoning ordinance need reevaluation, maybe consider Contract zoning, form based code
3. Better structured/organized urban open space
4. Services capacity analysis
5. Incorporate climate change into planning process

## Arts, Recreation and The Village

### Strengths – What are South Berwick’s strengths?

1. Making downtown stronger, people are moving to South Berwick because of downtown
2. Walkable downtown
3. No chains, Local stores, events, outdoor resources, Event flags create sense of community
4. Open spaces, but they need more love
5. Lots of parking
6. Happy people, lots of community engagement
  - a. Plenty of volunteers
  - b. Schools
7. We have what tourists like
8. Visibly historic
  - a. HDC and National Register provide some layer of protection for historic resources
9. **Nice recreation facilities close to town**
  - a. Town recreation programs are full (in demand)
  - b. **Lots of recreation assets**
  - c. **Ski Hill and Recreational fields at Aggie pull the community together.**
10. Safe community, low levels of crime, parents are comfortable
11. Great neighborhoods, multi-generational.
12. Library is an incredible asset downtown.
13. Percent of open space and access to it
14. Undeveloped waterfront
15. Berwick Academy does work with non-profits, some crossovers
16. Year-round/multi-season community events

### Weaknesses/Threats – What are challenges? Areas of concern?

1. Some areas missing from the inventory chapters
  - a. Shoetown playground
  - b. Cummings mill park
  - c. Town forest
2. Downtown needs improvements
  - a. Untidy – could clean up better after winter, landscaping
  - b. Need more connectivity
  - c. Public art
  - d. Bike racks
  - e. EV charging stations
3. Need for updates and investment in town outdoor recreation opportunities.
4. **Consistent brand**
  - a. **Signage for assets**
  - b. **Communication**
5. Don’t lose volunteer momentum!



- a. Volunteerism may decrease when folks age out
  - b. How to encourage/keep up momentum with newer generation
  - c. Pandemic impact
  - d. Relying too heavily on volunteer groups
6. Lacking a broader Community Center
- a. Kittery community center as an example.
7. Communication between groups
- a. Lots of the local groups work “in their own lane.”
    - i. Including the town
    - ii. Town should take a stronger role in pulling groups together
8. Prepare for growth after marketing
9. **Broadband is an unseen/not discussed issue**
10. How do we connect many small spaces?
- a. Connectivity between open space and recreation
    - i. Better accessibility
  - b. Promote intimacy, activity, lighting, art, and BEAUTY.**
    - i. Trash cans**
  - c. Improve Inherent sense of place
    - i. Walkability
    - ii. Safety (shoetown park)
- 11. Prioritize COMP plan recommendations**
- a. Plan needs to be combine these ideas
12. Co-locate multigenerational activities, aka parents & teens & young children could all be entertained in the same public space
13. Lack of walkable infrastructure separate from roads
14. Façade problems downtown
- a. Doesn’t match other well-maintained areas (inconsistent)
  - b. Streetscapes
15. Missing a venue space
- 16. Communication/Awareness/Marketing**
- a. May need a map for
    - i. Businesses
    - ii. Parking
    - iii. Recreation
17. Beautification
18. Educating decision-makers, make sure boards/committees have an understanding of needs/resources
19. Economy is changing with increasing work-from-home popularity.

What’s next? – Opportunities for moving forward

- 1. **Increase awareness of arts & rec opportunities**
  - a. communication between groups**
  - b. Mapping/Wayfinding**

- c. Historic plaques
- 2. Creating connectivity between assets**
  - a. Promote non-automobile transit.
    - i. Walking
    - ii. Biking
    - iii. Off-road
  - b. Compare to Dover, NH.
  - c. GWLT is building a trail connecting the Counting House and pond!
  - d. Can the town make this a new priority?
- 3. Improve citizen communication with town, transparency**
  - a. Including information from engaged groups
- 4. Town hall as a community space?**
- 5. Needs to be addressed:
  - a. **shoetown park**
  - b. **cummings mill park**
  - c. **pickleball court?**
  - d. skate park
  - e. Use for the Red Barn?
- 6. Preserve outdoor opportunities as public space.

### Takeaways

- 1. Strong downtown potential, BUT**
  - a. Needs aesthetic improvements
  - b. Consistent branding
- 2. Strong recreational assets**
- 3. Active community engagement, BUT
  - a. Relied on too heavily
  - b. Risks losing momentum due to pandemic and with younger generation.
  - c. **Uncoordinated**
- 4. Need to prioritize Comp plan recommendations**
- 5. COMMUNICATION and AWARENESS**
  - a. Different groups need to work together and communicate.
  - b. **The town should take a more active role in coordination between groups.**
  - c. Coordinate volunteer efforts