

## **Great ideas, great people, a good start**

By Scott Pickering

If you saw only the last half hour of the 10-hour gathering of more than 120 Bristol citizens last weekend, then you missed the good stuff. I was thinking that as a small group of Bristol town officials arrived for the culmination of the Voices For Bristol's Future forum, held last Friday night and Saturday in the Mt. Hope High School cafeteria. I was one of those roughly 120 Bristol residents who huddled in small and large groups for 10 hours over two days to discuss the future of this community.

Organizers kept most town leaders outside of the group, but invited them to join us at the end of the day Saturday, when the Cliff Notes version of our collective wisdom was made public. So in they came — a few town councilors, the town planner and zoning enforcement officer, the town administrator and others — to hear what we all had to say about Bristol today, and Bristol tomorrow. If they were disappointed, I can understand why. Taken as just a snapshot, the final presentation was not very impressive. We offered some hastily-worded goals for how to improve and protect the waterfront, expand recreational facilities, strengthen our schools and preserve the environment. None of it was brilliant or insightful. None of it was groundbreaking. But none of it accurately conveyed what transpired over those two days. None of it told the real story.

The real story is that education and the environment are the two areas most important to Bristol's future, according to the majority opinion from this large and diverse sampling of Bristol residents. The downtown district is a close third. The real story is that of the 120 or so who participated in the two-day affair, 75 percent (that's about 90) volunteered to continue working on the goals outlined during the event. With the right leadership and enough momentum, they could legitimately become a force for change in this community.

The real story is that many, many people who had never met before, spent hours sitting next to people who were formerly strangers, listening, debating (although the rules said we weren't supposed to) and finding common ground.

The real story is that many of us had a lot of fun. I met a lot of great people, heard a lot of great ideas and felt like I was taking part in something bigger than me. It was energizing. So what did we actually accomplish? Time will tell.

In the two days, we spent about 1,000 collective brainpower hours to decide that education and the environment are the two most critical issues facing Bristol as it sails forward in the 21st century. The other top priorities, in descending order, are: the downtown; the waterfront; the economy (taxes, housing costs, etc.); and lastly, recreational facilities.

Personally, I'm disappointed that traffic, congestion and over-development did not land higher on the priority list. As someone who lives in the town's true population center — no, not downtown; I'm talking about the many interconnected neighborhoods east of Metacom Avenue — congestion, traffic and rampant development are ENORMOUS areas of concern. It would be nice if someone noticed ...

Okay, off the soapbox. Back to what we accomplished. One thing we proved was that Bristol residents are proud folks. The two consultants hired to run the meeting joked that they had never been to a town with so many things to boast of. Some towns, they said, struggle to fill one sheet of a flip chart with positive attributes about their community, but on Friday night Bristol citizens carried on through sheet after sheet as they listed the town's assets. The organizers finally had to cut it off, even while some people were jumping up and down and waving their arms for attention.

It was great to see the schools receive top billing from Bristol citizens. Obviously many people at all age and income levels care about the quality of our schools. I spent the last two hours of the forum working on an education panel, and I think we came up with good ideas for how to improve the schools. Goals range from doing outreach to get parents more involved in their child's education, to grouping students in smaller learning clusters, such as more magnet schools, charter schools or alternative education systems.

I won't list all the goals here (overall, the group produced 36 of them), and you'll be hearing more about them in the future. Last I heard, organizers were still flipping through pages of notes, stickies and chicken scratch to sort through all the ideas. When they do, they'll find plenty of good stuff in there — a true teen center, a Thames (Bristol) to Thames (Newport) ferry, a downtown trolley, a public sailing center, an eastside bike path. These are just some of the creative ideas I heard during the forum. The real story of this event is in the details, and when others get to see them, I think they'll be impressed.=

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