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By Ted Hayes

'Voices for Bristol's Future' is Brain-storming for a better Bristol

Diana Campbell is a busy woman. With just 11 weeks to go before Voices for Bristol's Future, a two-day symposium on Bristol's future she created and has helped promote, there's lots and lots to do. But the former Hopkinton, Mass. resident, who moved back to her native Bristol two years ago after an absence of 30 years, is looking forward to the challenge.

"People are excited," she said at a meeting of Preserve Bristol last Thursday. "I get at least a phone call a day from people asking what they can do."

Voices, a two-day charette scheduled to be held March 2-3 at Mt. Hope High School, will bring together 150 Bristol residents from diverse walks of life and backgrounds in an effort to answer a big question: Where is Bristol headed?

Though the town has a Comprehensive Community Plan, an official document that spells out how the town should grow culturally, physically and economically, Ms. Campbell hopes her forum will give town officials and regular citizens a greater insight to where Bristol is today, and where residents hope it will be in the future. She also believes it will get more people interested in the future of their town. That's what happened when she participated in a similar forum in Hopkinton several years ago.

"You need to be a participant in the community you live in," she said. "You can't just sit in your house. A community is most successful when the people who live there feel they are a part of that community. In Hopkinton the response was phenomenal."

The idea is to bring together 75 people who represent organizations and town departments, and another 75 citizens at large. Participants will break into small groups to brainstorm ideas; when they are done, Voices will turn over a report to the Bristol Town Council. In all, the program will cost about \$20,000 to put on.

While they agreed that the forum will generate good ideas, several town officials warned at Thursday's meeting that participants shouldn't expect broad, sweeping change to result directly from their report.

Bristol Planning Board Chairman James Farley said that while significant change might have occurred as a result of Hopkinton's forum, Bristol is a different town with different issues.

"People fight to come to Bristol," he said. "We like our town. Don't expect utopia — it's not gonna happen. This (charette) is an important part of the process, but it's not the end all."

More likely, he said, Voices' report will serve as a useful tool to help update the community plan, which the state mandates must be updated every several years.

Bristol Community Development Director Diane C. Williamson agreed.

"I think people need to know that we have been working toward a vision" of Bristol. "This could become a part of that update process [but] people shouldn't expect that every single idea becomes part of the comprehensive plan update."

While there may be uncertainties about what will come of the charette's report, Ms. Campbell said that, at the very least, it will bring many people with a stake in the town's future together to think of novel ways to improve Bristol. If the town has already thought of their ideas, fine; but if not, there is an opportunity.

"I'm really excited," she said. "I'm putting my faith in what happened in Hopkinton to make sure it happens here. Clearly, the commitment of the town council, planning board and other officials is going to be critical."

Note: For more information on Voices for Bristol's Future, including how to get involved, see www.voicesforbristol.com

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