

Bristol Phoenix Editorial, December 15, 2006
Listen to the people of Bristol

Diana Campbell is onto something. In 11 weeks, her "Voices for Bristol's Future" symposium will meet to brainstorm ways to improve Bristol, an idea that came to her after a similar symposium held in her former home of Hopkinton, Mass., was a huge success.

Ms. Campbell, who recently won a seat on the Bristol Warren Regional School Committee, has big plans for Bristol's schools, but bigger ones for the town. She sees the symposium as a chance to bring together people who normally wouldn't meet, all in the hopes of finding novel ways to make Bristol a better place to live.

Let's hope the powers-that-be are listening; a chance would be missed if they aren't.

At a meeting last week, Bristol Planning Board Chairman James Farley was gracious but told Ms. Campbell and her hosts, Preserve Bristol, not to expect the moon. Speaking of the real estate rush here, the influx of new money and the proactive planning already done by town officials, he told her Bristol is worlds apart from Hopkinton, and that the suggestions made by the group will be treated as just that: suggestions. The town already has a Comprehensive Community Plan, he continued, a document mandated by the state that spells out how Bristol should grow economically, socially and physically, and the town is in good hands.

Fair enough, but town officials shouldn't assume they have all the answers. Town leaders have been known to appoint themselves or their friends to important posts, or to populate independent commissions with government insiders. They sometimes think, act and make decisions in an insular environment.

As regards the comprehensive plan, let's not pretend this very important, well-crafted document has guided every decision made by Bristol town government. Though the plan does outline the right vision for Bristol's future, it is ultimately ink on paper. Its spirit is often challenged by the real-life scenarios that unfold in a town like Bristol, and it is often subject to interpretation.

This symposium probably won't change the course of Bristol history, but it will hopefully produce some good ideas for this community and its people. The voices of private citizens — whether they've lived here six years or 60 — should be valued, and we hope their collective energy and brainpower are received warmly by those in power.