



Community Conversation Task Force Report and Recommendation

October 2011

Presented to the Sponsoring Organizations

City of Mequon
Mequon-Thiensville Chamber of Commerce
Mequon-Thiensville School District
Village of Thiensville

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Community Conversation Task Force Report and Recommendation is the end of the beginning.

The Task Force urges the City of Mequon, Mequon-Thiensville Chamber of Commerce, Mequon-Thiensville School District (MTSD) and Village of Thiensville (together, the Sponsoring Organizations) to:

1. Take action on recommendations presented;
2. Continue to solicit participation from all segments of the Community; and
3. Communicate regularly with the Community.

The Mequon-Thiensville Community has significant assets. It is imperative an investment is made in several of them and soon. Inaction will have adverse consequences to our local economy, housing market and education system. The time to act is now.

Priorities

1. Vision: It is imperative the Sponsoring Organizations have a shared Vision for the Community. The notion Mequon-Thiensville residents do not want change needs to be challenged. Change is happening. It is either pro-active, informed and strategically guided, or it is reactive and ineffective.
2. Brand: The Sponsoring Organizations must collaborate and invest in developing a brand for the Community and create strategies to promote Community uniqueness and quality of life.
3. Communication: Communications and conversations must be significantly improved and unified to: achieve a higher level of information sharing, stimulate Community participation, develop awareness of the unique assets available and promote the Community to the outside world.
4. Schools: Threats to the historical excellence of the MTSD need to be addressed.
5. Housing: Improve the mix of housing options, create incentives to revitalize older homes and neighborhoods and allow the creation of new unique sub-divisions. Planned population growth policy and shifting demographics need to be addressed.
6. Economic Development: The City and Village must collaborate and invest to maintain the quality services they provide and place more emphasis on increasing investment and redevelopment into core economic centers.

INTRODUCTION

The Community Conversation started about a year ago and emerged from a series of meetings between the Mequon-Thiensville Chamber of Commerce (Chamber) and the Mequon-Thiensville School District (MTSD). The original purpose of the meetings was to look for areas where the MTSD and Chamber could work together to address the impact of declining District enrollment and its ramifications on the Mequon-Thiensville Community.

Once started, it was clear the scope of the problem encompassed issues related to lack of growth, an aging community, housing inadequacies, zoning issues, lack of municipal focus, failing economic development, undefined long-term goals and some ancillary issues. The two municipalities had to be involved.

As a result, a “Community Conversation” about the future of Mequon-Thiensville was held at Concordia University on May 25, 2011 involving the four stakeholders, now referred to as the Sponsoring Organizations: The City of Mequon, the MTSD, the Chamber and The Village of Thiensville. In addition, elected officials, municipal administrators and community residents were invited to express their views.

The stated purpose of the meeting was to:

1. Create a forum for the Sponsoring Organizations to share information about the current status of the Community.
2. Discuss creation of a jointly shared Vision.
3. Form an ad hoc committee to develop a process for community input, leading to recommendations for follow up discussion.

The Sponsors of the Community Conversation called for nominations of volunteers to be part of the Community Conversation Task Force. From more than 60 applications, 38 people were invited to work on the Task Force which would address: the current status of the Community, its future aspirations and recommendations on how to get from here to there.

This report is an historic response to this request. Historic because it is the first time these stakeholders have, following a joint public meeting, agreed to work together to confront a variety of issues facing the Community.

The first Task Force meeting was held on July 14, 2011. Ground rules for large group meetings and procedures were discussed. Subsequent sessions and breakout groups defined four areas of interest:

1. Quality of Life and Identity: Issues included the current status of the quality of life in Mequon-Thiensville, the Community's aspirations for the future and how to get from here to there.
2. Education: Issues included declining enrollment, the quality of K-12 education in the Community and how to better utilize Concordia and MATC to provide services in continuing education to residents.
3. Housing: Issues included the viability of appropriate and economically viable housing for new families moving to the area and local empty nesters looking to downsize into local condominiums or apartments.
4. Economic Development: Business and municipal issues impacting growth.

In a series of general sessions over the next several weeks, the Task Force members self-selected into one of the four sub-groups aligned with the areas stated above. The Task Force and its sub-groups held approximately seventy (70) hours of meetings. Individual members spent countless additional hours in research, communicating apart from the Task Force meetings, contacting and conversing with experts and soliciting the opinions of fellow citizens.

These sub-groups generated the observations and recommendations which comprise this report.

Keep in mind this report is not an end product, but the end of the beginning. It serves as a starting point for the next stage, which is a more concrete plan that provides greater specificity in recommendations and benchmarks for the Sponsoring Organizations. And while the report is big, there are actionable steps which can be taken immediately, such as to create a Vision and Brand strategy.

Task Force members considered it a privilege and a valuable experience to have served and they thank the Sponsoring Organizations for the opportunity. New friendships were forged, respect was shown for divergent opinions and attitudes, and the civility of our deliberations set a standard for future Community discussion.

Task Force Members

| | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| Nancy Anderson | Laura Leszczynski |
| Linda Bendix | Susan Lueders |
| Daniel Bradley | Pat Marchese |
| Shelley Burns | Allen Martin |
| Paul Buzzell | Dale Mayr |
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| Stephanie Clark | Cindy Miske |
| Colleen Cowen | Van Mobley |
| Kim Ebinger | Andrew Nerbun |
| William Evers | Andrew Petzold |
| Joyce Feaster | Al Prochnow |
| Jeff Francis | William Read |
| Lucia Francis | John Richmond |
| Jerry Fulmer | David Romoser |
| Dan Gannon | Jon Safran |
| Richard Gattoni | Wally Sommer |
| Gordon Hetzel | Susan Stockton |
| Dave Jackson | John Treffert |
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QUALITY OF LIFE AND IDENTITY

Sub-Group Report

Current Status

Most of the description of Quality of Life and Identity of Mequon-Thiensville is well known to the readers of this report. Mequon-Thiensville consists of a well-educated and affluent community, which is actually two communities, the Village of Thiensville, a small enclave of about one square mile which is surrounded by the larger City of Mequon.

The MTSD scores as one of the best in the state and ranks highly at the national level. The Community is home to public and private K-8 schools, The Milwaukee Area Technical College, Concordia University Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Most high school graduates continue their education and have been successful in subsequent careers. Academic excellence is a universal standard. Most, if not all of our schools boast awards and recognitions that make the Community an attractive location for raising families. In addition to offering excellent educational opportunities, our schools also excel in a wide range of musical, academic and sports activities.

The two municipalities provide a safe environment and a wide range of services, but still maintain a focus on low taxes. The Community has a local hospital and several local medical clinics and specialists. A concentration of health care businesses are located around the hospital.

The Community is widely known as a bedroom community with many residents who work outside its boundaries. A very high percentage of our well-educated and upper-income residents spend significant time elsewhere. Some feel this accounts for a certain amount of apathy with regard to local politics and participation in Community affairs. We have a diverse and active religious community, a variety of service clubs, an excellent joint library and a wide variety of cultural and recreational opportunities.

However, Mequon-Thiensville is very diverse in many ways and there seems to be a lack of an overarching feeling of community. We have a wide range of affinity groups; but we do not share common values nor do we all necessarily recognize a shared quality of life. Even the important values we espouse like quality of education, safety, a healthy life style, good municipal services and so on tend to be mitigated when confronted with the costs of attaining and maintaining these ideals. Until we can get the Community and municipal leaders to coalesce around a common Vision, we will remain a splintered community.

Our major goal is to determine how we can develop and remain focused on a common Vision that represents all our stakeholders.

Aspirations

In order to ascertain measurements for quality of life, we evaluated an article from the magazine *Money*, September 2011, called the “100 Best Places to Live in America”. For desirable cities with 50,000 or fewer residents, the common elements were: good job opportunities, fiscal strength, top-notch schools, safe streets, good health care, cultural activities, recreational activities, community feel, small town ambiance, affordable and stable housing, access to a major city, opportunity for local employment and good weather. Of the elements cited above, the following were considered most important and, unlike the weather, something could be done about them.

Recommendations

Our top priorities are establishing a Vision, a Branding strategy and improving communication.

1. Create a Vision: It is imperative the Sponsoring Organizations have a shared Vision for the Community. The notion Mequon-Thiensville residents do not want change needs to be challenged. Change is happening. It is either pro-active, informed and strategically guided, or it is reactive ineffective.
2. Develop a Brand: The Sponsoring Organizations must collaborate and invest in developing a brand for the Community and create strategies to promote Community uniqueness and quality of life.
3. Improve Communication: Communications and conversations must be significantly improved and unified to: achieve a higher level of information sharing, stimulate Community participation, develop awareness of the unique assets available and promote the Community to the outside world.

The City and Village websites need to be significantly improved to functionally accomplish these goals but they should also reflect the look and feel of Mequon-Thiensville.

4. Top-Notch Schools: We want to be a community of lifelong learners known for its schools and investing in academic and extracurricular excellence. All stakeholders must view this as a top priority. The quality of schools impacts the future workforce and the attractiveness of the Community to business and families.
5. Economically Viable Housing: Efforts must be made to address this issue since it affects not only the supply of housing for younger families, but also impacts the strength and quality of retail businesses. Attractive housing will increase the enrollment of the school district which is critical to funding a superior school system. Further, we are confronted with an aging population and low growth; however, an influx of families with children will mitigate that issue and renew our age diversity, allowing for healthy shops and businesses.

Quality of Life and Identity, continued

6. Community Feel and Small Town Ambiance: We would like to be a welcoming community where you know your neighbor. We need a plan to engage with new residents to make them feel at home and to make them aware of local offerings. Further, we recognize the desire for a multigenerational, business and retail town center. The desire for a revitalization of the Town Center with utilization of the river would be a big step in that direction.
7. Fiscal Strength: To maintain a superior quality of life, Mequon-Thiensville must support an increased investment in the school district and our municipalities. It is important we maintain the educational programs and municipal services that have been historically available. This must be accomplished by balancing the desire for lower taxes with these necessary investments.
8. Safe Community: Our performance in this area has been excellent and we wish for it to continue.
9. Cultural Activities: To respond to the Community needs, we would like to see more local activities benefitting from additional communication. Stakeholders should encourage enhanced communication using new media tools such as stakeholder websites available through existing infrastructure.
10. Recreational Activities: Although not a major issue, we would like to see additional activities attached to a new initiative to leverage some of our recreational assets. These too would benefit from the major issues mentioned above.
11. Access to Local Jobs: We would encourage more local jobs through economic development and would like to see the municipalities encourage “open for business.”

Clearly, of the items mentioned above, their success impacts the overall health of the Community, right down to individual neighborhoods and streets.

EDUCATION

Sub-Group Report

Current Status

A healthy public school system is necessary for a thriving community. The Mequon-Thiensville Community provides high quality educational opportunities for learners of all ages. There are choices between public and private education at all levels, pre-kindergarten through post-secondary, as well as many opportunities for life-long learners.

The MTSD has provided excellence using its Comprehensive Education Framework including (but not all inclusive):

1. Providing key content knowledge (reading, writing, arithmetic, science, history).
2. Developing cognitive skills and academic self-management behaviors (our children learn how to learn, critical to navigate ever-changing economies).
3. Developing knowledge and techniques to navigate college and career.
4. Exposing students to art, music, physical education and world languages.
5. Sponsoring social-emotional services to support students in community, service, citizenship and leadership.
6. Offering comprehensive and diverse electives to support college and career pathways.
7. Hiring high quality teachers and fostering a collaborative relationship between teachers, students, administration and parents.

However, the Community is at a crossroads in deciding how to sustain our excellent public school district. For decades, we have demanded and supported high quality education as our legacy. Our community has repeatedly proclaimed that an advantage of living in Mequon-Thiensville is the strength of our schools. Our excellent outcomes, education model, and extracurriculars such as drama, sports, service, music & artistic offerings are an asset to the Mequon-Thiensville Community and have contributed to the high property values Mequon-Thiensville enjoys.

The tightening budget situation and falling enrollment threatens our ability to maintain this excellence. In the past eleven years, MTSD has cut \$10M out of the budget. Prudent management has mitigated some of the impact of these cuts on the programs provided to our children thus far. The coming biennial budget (2013-14) will challenge the ability to continue the comprehensive programming and the scope of learning the District has historically provided. Educational offerings that prepare our children for top-tier colleges and differentiate us from other North Shore and Ozaukee districts, are at risk.

Aspirations

Our future depends on providing an education that is “the best we can be”. Our national educational legacy once prepared our children to lead the world, but many nations have overtaken us. We must prepare our children to thrive in an increasingly competitive and global economy. “The best we can be” education will continue to be a differentiator between the Community and neighbors to the North, South and West, and therefore, a positive influence to entice families to move to Mequon-Thiensville.

“The best we can be”, however, does not imply unlimited spending or lack of accountability. Fiscal responsibility must be balanced. The District has a responsibility to effectively and efficiently manage resources. The community has the responsibility to invest in the MTSD to achieve the quality of education required for a thriving community.

Accountability is achieved with measures. Comprehensive measures, more than one, are required to measure results of multiple aspects of education. Longitudinal measures of success beyond high school or post-secondary education are necessary to determine whether we are preparing our children appropriately for college and career.

Recommendations

Threats to the historical excellence of the MTSD need to be addressed. Therefore, we respectfully offer the following recommendations to continue the legacy of excellence in education:

1. Pursue continuous improvement for educational excellence.
2. Institute forward-facing/global education deliveries and curriculum to prepare students to thrive in the real world, the next step and their career.
3. Comprehensive programming and support for all post-secondary school options.
4. Demonstrate fiscal responsibility.
5. Leverage and collaborate across Community assets.
6. Develop comprehensive and longitudinal measures of academic and educational success.
7. Build more bridges between education and the Community.

HOUSING

Sub-Group Report

Current Status

The Mequon-Thiensville communities have assets we are proud of and are characterized by:

1. A mix of rural and urban properties that extend for almost 50 square miles, with access to beautiful bodies of water and parks, co-existence with wildlife, farmlands and a physical sense of “openness.”
2. Our schools, which are among the best in the state, are viewed as one of the top reasons why potential homebuyers seek out this Community.
3. Strong infrastructure and low crime rates.

It is from this perspective of “abundance” the Housing sub-group decided to do its work. We were deliberate about balancing our discussions between building on the Community’s strengths and addressing the barriers to fully realizing the Community we desire. The Task Force reached the following conclusions regarding the barriers:

1. The decline in school enrollment may be a leading indicator for more serious Community-wide concerns regarding the health and viability of Mequon-Thiensville.
2. There is a lack of both Vision and a sense of urgency concerning the Community’s health and sustainability.
3. Existing first family entry homes are not appealing to young families.
4. Our Community is competing with other nearby communities for families, but is handicapped by an overall shrinking school age population.
5. There is concern and perhaps misinformation in the Community about what housing development may mean to them.
6. Issues related to the expansion of the sewer service area seem to limit some development possibilities.

Aspirations

The Housing sub-group established a shared vision related to housing:

To make available diverse housing options which support our schools and businesses, by shifting the median age younger, while preserving our rural-urban character, and creating a community that people will be homesick for.

Specifically:

1. Housing options available play a central role in determining the age demographic of a community and if we are to shift our median age to a younger one, we will need to offer housing that attracts younger families, young couples and young singles.
2. Housing, schools, business and quality of life are interdependent.
3. Strong schools are necessary for a strong community and have a positive impact on housing values. In order to provide the educational programs, classes and extra-curricular choices, including programs and facilities available to seniors, a certain enrollment threshold must be met. If this threshold is not met, additional financial support is needed for the schools, or the schools and Community will suffer.
4. There is value to the Community if our teachers, nurses, firefighters, police officers and their families live here. But to live here, there must be housing available that they can afford to buy or rent.
5. Unique housing/subdivision designs can, in and of itself, provide an “attractiveness” feature and can help us achieve demographics and image goals.
6. In Mequon, there is ample land to be creative and constructive.

Recommendations

Planned population growth policy and shifting demographics need to be addressed. Toward this end, our top three priorities ask the City and Village to improve the mix of housing options, create incentives to revitalize older homes and neighborhoods and allow the creation of new unique sub-divisions.

1. Improve the mix of housing options:
 - In the Town Center, create additional incentives for development of a unique mix of houses, apartments and condominiums for the young professional and active retiree.
 - Provide well designed and unique spaces built in new mixed-use buildings at attractive prices. This could include lofts or repurposing of existing property or land, which would be accessible to resources like bike trails, dog walks, the river walk, shopping, services, restaurants, groceries, swimming, recreation, festivals, the library and parks.
2. Create incentives for revitalizing older homes and tired neighborhoods, which would include enhanced landscaping, welcoming gateways, small pocket parks and community gardens. Remodeling grants for young families, tax incentives and ready access to a team of experts to help new homeowners with a ‘vision’ could serve as effective strategies to support this initiative.
3. Allow the creation of eco-friendly and/or technology-friendly ‘cluster’ sub-divisions for younger families, singles and older adults. Ideally, these would be small houses but of superb quality and would include unique features: low-energy systems, shared vegetable plots, shared play spaces, shared thermal heating, technology/connectivity, trails connecting to other areas, low VOC paints, and be ADA friendly not only inside but outside.

In addition, in order to move more fully toward our vision of a community people will be homesick for, we are recommending that we:

1. Implement a public relations/communications campaign that 'brands' the Community in such a way as to attract young families and singles and inspires our citizenry to become proud ambassadors of Mequon and Thiensville.
2. Create gateways into the Community which tie into our Vision and Branding, and entryways into subdivisions, neighborhoods and gathering spaces.
3. Support progressive housing options (single family homes, condos, apartments) be offered and incentivized.
 - Consider strategies that involve potential zoning changes, expansion of the sewer and municipal water district areas as tools to use in order to achieve the goal of providing affordable and attractive housing options.
 - Eliminate municipal policy and procedural barriers which currently exist that inhibit development of the housing options we desire and replace them with a common sense approach to the approval process that retains building aesthetics while making it more user-friendly and affordable.
4. Explore options to incentivize young families to buy existing homes currently for sale.
5. Encourage multiple opportunities to engage young and old and enhance our sense of community through the creation of intentional connections between gathering spaces and bike and walking paths, in and between residential areas.
6. Develop off-campus housing for students who attend Concordia and MATC that will allow them to live here as well as go to school here.
7. Highlight the rural-urban mix we enjoy as an attractive feature worth preserving.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Sub-Group Report

Current Status

The current state of Economic Development in Mequon-Thiensville community could be characterized as stagnant. Although there are certainly many thriving businesses in the Community, we currently have some of the highest vacancy rates in Southeast Wisconsin. We are especially heavy with Class B and Class C properties.

The current demographics are extremely important and pose many challenges to the Community. Our population base is spread-out over a very large geographic area and the population growth is negligible. The main commercial area is centered in the area around North Port Washington and Mequon Roads with a secondary commercial area to the west on Mequon Road and Cedarburg Road. Thiensville also has a main street which is commercially viable and has opportunity for re-development. In the past, development has centered mostly on upscale specialty shops. There are not a lot of destination retailers in our area.

We have external factors that have also become challenges. Our proximity to Bayshore Mall and the intense developments in Grafton around Highway 60 and Port Washington Road can be negatives for potential retailers and provide destination shopping for the local community.

Other local factors are also troublesome: stagnant retail properties that are not owned by local owners and investors, under-performing TIFs (which need to be revitalized), the perception that the area does not want new business, municipal governments that can be slow to respond to business needs, a declining school enrollment, the lack of job opportunities for high school and college graduates, a maturing of the population and the lack of new first-family housing for younger families. Finally, we are not maximizing Thiensville's "walk-able community" living option (higher density housing with shopping and dining options).

Aspirations

Measurable Objectives:

1. A community that continues to have dramatic and responsive business development, success measured as a percentage of total tax revenue paid by business v. individual citizens and the total number of businesses in Mequon-Thiensville.
2. A responsible local government that listens effectively to members of the Community and shares a goal of increasing communication between government and business. Community listening sessions and expanded website activity could be measures of success.

Recommendations

1. The City and Village must collaborate and invest to maintain the quality services they provide and place more emphasis on increasing investment and redevelopment into core economic centers.
 - Find ways to promote TIF #2.
 - Revisit the North Port Washington Road Corridor with an eye to redevelop and reinvestment.
 - Renew efforts to revitalize each TIF district to include a new plan for the TIF #3 (Town Center).
2. Improve the Business Atmosphere and perhaps establish a Business Incubator.
3. Improve communications between the four Sponsoring Organizations through a series of meetings to include discussion of expectations, efficiency and citizen involvement, among others.
4. Extend the sewer service area.
5. Accentuate community strengths to give a common look and feel.