



Vision of Tomorrow: Wrentham Master Plan 2030

Focus Group findings

February 2, 2021

These focus groups are just the beginning! Our focus groups were limited in number, and we'd love to continue the conversation.

If you live or work in Wrentham and identify as a:

- **Senior,**
- **Member of a lower-income household (the median income in Wrentham is \$130,000),**
- **Person of color, or**
- **Business owner**

Please tell us your perspective on housing and economic development in Wrentham!

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The year-long *Vision of Tomorrow: Wrentham Master Plan 2030* planning process includes a variety of community engagement strategies. A town-wide survey with more than 1,300 responses and a virtual public forum were conducted in Fall 2020. In follow-up to these strategies, focus groups were conducted to target our community engagement on specific populations: seniors, affordable housing residents, people of color, and businesses. In particular, low-income residents and residents of color were underrepresented in the survey, thus they were prioritized for focus groups.

The focus groups were aimed at better understanding the challenges and opportunities related to housing and economic development in Wrentham, as well as the impacts of COVID-19 on specific populations in Wrentham. That said, the perspectives of focus group participants do not represent all perspectives of the target population. The focus group findings should be understood as individual perspectives that enrich the quantitative analysis and more general community engagement strategies to inform the goals and strategies of the Master Plan.

The findings of the focus groups are summarized on the following pages. For more information on the Wrentham Master Plan, please visit: <https://www.mapc.org/resource-library/wrentham-master-plan/>

Process of coordinating and hosting focus groups

The focus groups were conducted virtually on Zoom or by phone between the dates of January 13 and January 19, 2021. All names of focus group participants have been withdrawn from the notes to protect anonymity. A \$25 gift certificate to a local business was sent to all focus group participants who were interested, except for participants of the business focus group.

The target populations for the focus groups were identified for a few different reasons, and outreach depended on the group.

As Wrentham's population is aging, the needs of seniors will become increasingly important. Therefore, seniors were identified as one target population. To organize the focus group with seniors, Town and MAPC staff worked with the Senior Center.

As mentioned above, low-income households were underrepresented in the town-wide survey conducted in Fall 2020. To find low-income focus group participants, staff of the Town and Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) decided to reach out to residents of affordable housing, whose eligibility to live in the affordable housing is income-restricted. Staff worked with the Housing Authority and the developer of the Eagle Brook Development in Wrentham to identify potential interested participants, although all the identities of residents remained anonymous. Ultimately, MAPC staff interviewed two affordable housing residents.

With the focus of this Master Plan on economic development and housing, as well as the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, local businesses were also identified as a target population. Town and MAPC staff worked with the United Regional Chamber of Commerce to

identify local businesses to participate in the focus group, resulting in a total of seven participants, three of which were from the same business.

Some of the findings from the town-wide survey varied based on the race of the survey respondent. For example, people of color who participated in the survey prioritized making it “Easier to participate in and influence local decision-making”, whereas white respondents did not prioritize this potential improvement. This indicated that residents have different experiences of living in Wrentham based on their race. In addition, people of color were underrepresented in the survey. For these reasons, people of color were identified as a target population for our community engagement. To find focus group participants, MAPC staff reached out to survey respondents who self-identified as African America, Latinx, or Asian American.

Residents of affordable housing

Quotes

- “When I moved from market-rate housing to affordable housing, I stayed in Wrentham because Wrentham is home. I moved here in 1976.”
- “I manage a bank in Wrentham—everyone knows who I am.”
- “You should not have a label attached to you based on your street address. My house looks no different than my neighbors.”
- “Before moving to affordable housing, I didn’t even know it existed.”

Housing

- Strengths:
 - As a resident of Wrentham, it was relatively easy to find affordable housing in town
 - Have found Wrentham to be welcoming to renters and low-income residents
 - Like the location of the affordable housing near the Town Center and that the housing quiet and surrounded by green space
 - Mixed-income housing developments is critical in helping prevent stigma
 - Stigma against renters has reduced, because more and more people want to rent
- Challenges:
 - Lack of affordable options. Even the affordable rental units are \$1,800 for a 2-bedroom
 - The affordable rental housing units are very small in size
 - Process of finding affordable housing took approximately 2 years in all
 - Affordable senior housing availability comes in waves—sometimes there’s nothing available, and at other times there are a few units open
 - Some of the seniors should likely have assistance rather than continue to live alone
 - Lack of awareness and information about affordable housing.
 - Eligibility: Had a 401k so I was ineligible for the non-senior housing
 - Stigma against affordable housing. Even the police refer to the 100% affordable housing as the “projects”
 - Lack of information/awareness about affordable homeownership programs

Economic Development

- Strengths:
 - Jobs at the schools allow residents to work locally
- Challenges:
 - Shopping options (i.e. TJ Maxx, Shaw’s, etc.) in other towns are nearby, therefore no reason to shop within Wrentham

- Few reasons to go to the Town Center, except for pizza
- Long commutes

COVID

- Some local employers have treated employees very well during this time, including providing extending sick time

Asian-American, African American, and Latinx Residents

Quotes

- “We were starting a family, so we wanted to buy a home and Wrentham was the closest place to Boston that we could afford a newly built house.”
- “I knew Wrentham was 94% white, but I didn’t realize what that meant until I moved here. It hit me like a brick when I moved here.”

Follow-up to survey questions

- How can Wrentham be more welcoming to people of color?
 - Difficult that you don’t see people who look like you around town
 - A welcome packet, with info about events/activities would be helpful
 - Events that help you get to know neighbors—food trucks, cultural day, etc.
- How can Wrentham make it “Easier to participate in and influence local decision-making?”
 - Appreciate the new digital sign, but the website isn’t updated with event information about what the sign advertises (for example, wanted to take a cooking class but couldn’t find out how to on the website)
 - Provide photos of Select Board and other decision makers on the Town website
 - Summary of how decisions are made on the website. For example, the legislative process is different for cities and towns in Massachusetts.

Housing

- Strengths:
 - Appreciate all the families in Eagle Brook
 - Enjoy being able to walk downtown
 - Found a home to rent that I could afford
- Challenges:
 - (None)

Economic Development

- Strengths:
 - Amenities are nearby—Trader Joe’s within 10 minutes, Shaw’s, etc.
 - Love being able to walk to the White Barn farmstand
- Challenges:
 - Lack of diversity in restaurant options— for example, no Thai or Indian
 - Lack of healthcare jobs. Some in neighboring towns, but most in Boston area
- Opportunities
 - The more Mom n Pop shops, the better
 - When the weather is nicer, I’ll go walk around Downtown

- Making downtown more walkable with safe sidewalks will attract people.
- The Town Common is an attractive space, but sometimes it feels run down. Flowers and investment could make it more appealing.

COVID

- After COVID, I'd love to do activities together, especially if transportation were provided.

Senior Residents

Quotes

- We're happy, but we live in a big house and don't really need this much space. We've looked for smaller homes, but there aren't many options."
- "We put an addition on our home. I live in the new addition, and my daughter and her family lives in the rest of the house. It works really well, and it was a way to keep my house as I grew older."
- "When Helen Keller lived here, there were all kinds of stores downtown, and we had a trolley right to Boston."

Housing

- Strengths:
 - Moved here for the school system and small-town feel
 - Moved here for lower taxes
 - Proximity to Providence and Boston
 - Pond Village offers attractive senior housing—lower cost cooperative ownership and appealing neighborhood design and one-story, accessible housing
 - Town-owned land, including on Route 1A
- Challenges:
 - Housing that seniors can afford—both subsidized and market-rate
 - Housing that people who grew up here can afford
 - New housing are McMansions at high prices
 - Truck traffic
 - Difficult for seniors to get around without a car due to limited public transportation

Economic Development

- Strengths:
 - Potential for development on vacant Tyco Valve site Downtown
- Challenges:
 - Buy most things on Amazon, especially during COVID

COVID

- Had to gather in the parking lot of the senior center, because of limited outdoor space at the Senior Center

Businesses

Quotes

- “The business where I work has been here since 1901”
- “Quintessential New England town”

Housing

- Strengths:
 - Employees are “lower on the payscale” and haven’t had trouble finding housing
 - People are curious about what will be developed at the Crosby Valve Lot
- Challenges:
 - None

Economic Development

- Strengths:
 - Local businesses downtown
 - Distinct commercial districts: Downtown is very different than the Route 1 corridor and serves different clientele
- Challenges:
 - No Historical Society to help spread awareness and education about local history
 - Licensing fees are high, unpredictable, and not related to size of business
 - No Downtown Business Association. It would be helpful for the Town to reinvigorate a DBA. Previous DBA disbanded due to turnover, lack of relationship with the Town, no one to staff/facilitate the group
 - Lack of relationship between Downtown businesses and the Town
 - No coordinated branding/marketing, like Franklin has had
 - Love for Wrentham’s traditional downtown and small-town feel fuels opposition to any new commercial development.
 - Developers know there’s uncertainty in the potential to develop along Route 1, so they look to build in other Towns without even trying in Wrentham
 - Lack of understanding that new commercial development would help reduce residential property taxes

COVID

- COVID has been devastating to the hospitality business.
- It would be helpful to have the Town encourage people to buy locally (like Franklin First program)