

Nov 08 2023 11:05 am

Meeting Minutes of the
Economic Development Committee of the Fitchburg City Council
for
Thursday, November 2, 2023

Chairperson Van Hazinga called the meeting to order at approximately 6:03 p.m. in Legislative Building at 700 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA.

Members Present:

Councilor Andrew Van Hazinga, *chair*
Councilor Bernie Schlutz
Councilor Marisa Fleming (participating remotely)

Others Present:

Liz Murphy, *Community Development Director*
Mary Jo Bohart, *Economic Development Director*

Public Comment:

None

Agenda Items:

Mary Jo Bohart, Economic Development Director, to provide an update on the recently completed Downtown Fitchburg Consumer Market Analysis Report.

The report can be viewed at:

https://www.fitchburgma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/13369/6-30-23_FINAL-REPORT_Fitchburg-Downtown-Market-Report_FinePointAssociates-and-DHCD

A summary of key findings can be viewed at:

https://www.fitchburgma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/13370/6-30-23_EXEC-SUMMARY_Fitchburg-Downtown-Market_DHCD-and-Fine-Point-Assoc

Ms. Bohart provided a summary of the market study, which was funded through the Massachusetts Downtown Initiative (MDI) and designed to investigate downtown Fitchburg's market opportunities. The study looked at three market segments: Fitchburg residents, Fitchburg State University (FSU) students and staff, and downtown employees. Visitors to Fitchburg also present a significant market opportunity. However, it was not possible to survey this type of consumer, so only general statistics regarding the tourism sector were included in the study.

Potential for restaurant sales represent the largest market opportunity for downtown as there has historically been significant leakage of dining demand to other communities. There is also significant potential to capture greater business from FSU. The potential to capture business from visitors is largely untapped, with the city's largest attractions (Great Wolf and Game On) located in the far western portion of the Fitchburg. Greater targeted marketing and improved wayfinding signage is needed to more effectively attract tourists and visitors as potential consumers to the downtown.

Downtown has room to improve consumer comfort, including the following reported areas of

concern: Appearance of buildings/storefronts, safety, cleanliness/maintenance, and public spaces with seating areas.

Recommendations include:

- Consider a Downtown Management Organization (DMO) to promote, improve aesthetics, and maintain physical features downtown.
- Continue the Downtown Coordinator role to provide marketing assistance and organize events downtown (with particular focus on FSU students).
- Pursue additional MDI funding (to support launch of DMO and/or additional analysis to quantify economic effect of arts/culture – create a Cultural District designation with additional opportunities for funding).
- Downtown Vitality Act (currently under consideration) would create a downtown vitality fund using 5% of sales tax generated from MA online sales and provide grants to DMOs and Cultural Districts.
- Maximize Creative Cities efforts (potential 3rd year of funding, depending on progress).

Positive trends are underway downtown. Just since the survey was undertaken, four new restaurants have opened on Main St and four additional food ventures are preparing to open. This supports the market potential identified in the report.

Councilors engaged in a discussion regarding the consumer market analysis report with Ms. Bohart and Ms. Murphy:

Councilor Schultz asked how we better capture FSU market? Some of this involves focused marketing towards students, but also better coordination of downtown events that appeal to students. The city's biggest events are mostly held during the summer when school is not in session. Strong interest was expressed by FSU students in entertainment and activities downtown.

There also may be significant potential for development of a hotel in Fitchburg, especially considering the growth of Fitchburg as a tourist destination. It may make sense to commission a study to quantify this demand as a way to promote potential development sites suitable for a hotel in the city.

Councilor Schultz asked about the perception of safety issues downtown. Perception does not always align with actual data, but such sentiments by consumers still affect market. FPD patrols downtown in early evening (rather than daytime) would align with sentiments in survey responses. This is also a concern that could be largely alleviated by the presence of more people downtown (notion of 'many sets of eyes' conveying safety). This will improve as more businesses and residences open downtown.

Potential for retail uses downtown is limited due to larger changes in shopping trends (growth of malls, big box retailers, and online shopping). However, there is potential for specialty retailers to be located downtown, where in-person shopping and interaction with merchants is part of the experience. This also ties into the growth of the creative economy in Fitchburg.

Downtown market opportunities include three general groups: dining, entertainment, and specialty retail. There is also opportunity for personal services. Customers going to downtown for one of these uses frequently will also patronize another type.

Overall, the purpose of the analysis and summary report is not to get a passing or failing grade, but rather to identify potential growth areas within the downtown consumer market.

Residents and businesses are invited to reach out to Ms. Bohart if they have any feedback at either mbohart@fitchburgma.gov or (978) 829-1896.

Adjournment

Councilor Schultz moved to adjourn the meeting and Councilor Van Hazinga seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous consent.

The Economic Development Committee of the City Council adjourned at approximately 7:25 pm.

A video recording of the meeting can be viewed at:

<https://videoplayer.telvue.com/player/yycCAZPb0NN3zj2o5qio-YFMNC43NjCG/playlists/3129/media/833983>

Minutes prepared by Chair Van Hazinga