



Doing Business in Newtown 2010 Online Survey and Interviews

Key Findings
Recommendations
&
Actions for Implementing the
Recommendations

Approved by Newtown Economic Development Commission
December 14, 2010

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(3 years, 9 members)

The Economic Development Commission was formed, by Ordinance, for the promotion and development of the economic resources of the town. The commission consists of nine members who are electors of the Town, appointed by the First Selectman with the approval of the Board of Selectmen. The Economic Development Commission website is located at www.newtown.org.

Send any comments directly to the Economic Development Commission at edc@newtown.org.

“Doing Business in Newtown” (survey questionnaire, report and recommendations) was developed by The WriteDesign Company LLC, a Newtown-based business communication consulting firm, in cooperation with the Town of Newtown Economic Development Commission and its Business Advocacy and Retention Committee.

Key Findings

Reviewing the most significant findings from the current survey along with insight from prior research tells us:

- Newtown's top strength is its location -- for business owners, for attracting workers from the southeast and central parts of the state, and for customers from surrounding towns and beyond.
 - Other strengths include its character (cited several times as a draw for customers as well as home and small business owners), and the overall business climate vis-à-vis lease space, workforce and the availability of business services.
- Newtown's biggest weaknesses vis-à-vis attracting businesses are sign regulations that prevent customers from patronizing restaurants and retailers, issues with land use regulations and specific town departments (see Questions 4 and 5, Appendix A, pages 22-24), and general issues with taxes and cost of living.
- There are a wealth of opportunities to attract and retain businesses from antiques and arts dealers to corporate headquarters. Suggestions range from marketing and events that draw attendees to the former, to some kind of tax breaks for larger businesses or franchises in select locations. The 90 percent of respondents in the 2010 study who support neighborhood business centers echo the optimism about business growth in ways that enhance customer and resident work, living and shopping experiences while preserving the rural New England feel of the town. More on "opportunities" in the next section of this report, "Recommendations."
- Threats to business growth include:
 - Signage regulations perceived as inhibiting commerce.
 - The perception that the town does not go out of its way to promote or support local business.
 - Land use regulations that businesses do not understand; enforcement perceived as overzealous and beyond scope of regulations.
 - A stigma associated with certain types of businesses (e.g. fast food and "box store") though similar towns viewed favorably by residents have them.
 - Lack of parking and sidewalks to promote commerce.

Consultants' Recommendations

To build on its strengths and address issues raised through the 2010 assessment initiative, there are many steps the Town and Its Economic Development Commission can take. They fall into three categories: Regulations, Infrastructure and Advocacy/Support. EDC might consider establishing a task force in each area and, of course, sharing survey findings beyond what will be communicated through general news release. Here are suggestions in each area.

Regulations

- Work in a positive manner to gain common understanding of signage rules and:
 - Determine changes that will help businesses attract customers, while preserving the town's character
 - Develop a document that makes the requirements understandable, for pro-active communication to new and existing businesses.
- Determine a process that helps prevent land use issues involving new or expanding businesses from escalating into conflicts. Consider establishing a "buddy system" through which business owners are paired with someone who "knows the ropes" and can help them "make the case" for locating or expanding here.

Infrastructure

- Take the survey findings forward to appropriate Town groups and champion the kind of development the survey results encourage:
 - Expansion of neighborhood business centers in Sandy Hook, Botsford, Hawleyville and the Borough.
 - Creation of pedestrian- and parking-friendly features like sidewalks that enable people to move about safely among homes, retailers, restaurants etc.
 - Poll businesses further to determine needs for support services. Give heavier consideration to businesses seeking to locate or expand here that provide needed products and services.

Advocacy and Support

This is likely the area in which the Economic Development Commission can have the greatest impact. Survey findings suggest businesses would appreciate these kinds of help:

- Be a better "friend to business." Anecdotal responses tell us some businesses perceive both the Town and the EDC as "uncaring," "not

willing to go out of their way,” or “unresponsive.” This can be resolved through processes as well as communication.

- Develop and formalize a process that establishes touch points with businesses in Six Sigma style – from initial query to a follow-up call or letter that expresses disappointment if the Town loses an opportunity to retain or attract a desired business.
- As mentioned – establish a “buddy system” through which a Chamber member or supportive business in town is asked to partner with a new or expanding business to help it accomplish its goals.
- When asked what “going out of its way to help” might mean, one respondent mentioned his experience setting up a commercial kitchen for the first time, and how much he would have appreciated someone like a Realtor with a facility for lease showing him an example. Create a packet or PDF document that provides essential information about how to get started establishing or expanding a business here, and how to work the process through to successful completion. One respondent suggested a “Newcomer’s Package.”
- Create a “meet the neighbors” program including one or more events that enable businesses to showcase their products and services to local residents. One respondent suggested sponsoring a “Taste of Newtown” event for all restaurants, such as a street fair or town-wide open house to introduce businesses to the public.
- Launch a “Marketing Newtown” effort grounded on activities that generate real traffic or leads. Suggestions from survey respondents include using social media – blogging, keyword links etc. to draw customers around subjects such as crafts, art and antiques. A number of respondents felt Newtown did not do a good enough job of promoting itself as a “destination” for those things, as towns like Woodbury do.
- Generate e-mail lists from the survey activity and other contacts; produce single-subject “e-booklets” on subjects such as signage, expanding your business, art and antiques in Newtown, etc. and send periodically to raise visibility of the EDC.

One of the primary goals of this assessment project -- to learn how the Town and the EDC might better serve as an advocate for Newtown business -- may be met through what one interview subject described as building community. “This doesn’t happen organically,” he said. “It takes a lot of effort by motivated individuals. ... There has to be a big encouragement for people to be a community vs. [seeing the Town as an entity that makes them overcome] hurdles. ... It’s about bringing people together – give them cause to come out of their houses and meet the neighbors.”

Actions for Survey Implementation

As unanimously approved by the Economic Development Commission
12/14/2010

(In order of recommended actions ... First 5 items are considered most immediate)

1. Form working group with Land Use Agency, PZC, CofC, EDC, Fairfield Hills Authority and business representatives to identify specific signage problems, rectify same.
2. Do virtual brochure on Town government contact points for new or potential businesses and existing firms for display on EDC Web site.
3. Hire an Economic Development Coordinator, at 19 hours per week, to provide “buddy system” for all businesses needing help in navigating regulations or finding suitable quarters. Said coordinator to provide additional services as listed in proposed job description and be the contact point for media relations and public information.
4. Do presentation at town staff meeting to explain survey findings, gain support and find ways for cooperation. Liz Stocker idea
5. Draft plan for EDC to raise its profile and do more to represent commercial interests. See proposal #3, above.
6. With CofC, launch a “Buy Local” campaign and/or do more town-wide business- focused public events (fairs for Newtown vendors, products or Tastes-of-Newtown)
7. Utilize EDC’s Web site more to communicate with and encourage existing and potential development.
8. Integrate business interests with social media.
9. Decide how best to support neighborhood business districts
10. Find ways to measure payback of implemented measures.
11. Compare Newtown efforts with Ridgefield, others to see how to improve economic development efforts.

Submit revised budget to town agencies to accomplish selected actions.

The full survey report is online at this link:

<http://www.newtown.org/pdf/Business-Survey-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>