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TOPIC: Results of Newtown business survey

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NEWTOWN – Newtown’s business leaders have only two major complaints about doing business here. Strangely enough, real estate and personal property taxes aren’t among them.

The Newtown Economic Development Commission today unveiled a 32-page report on the result of a major survey this fall that reflects the hopes and concerns of the 1,750 known businesses in town. The full report may be accessed by going to the EDC website: <http://newtown.org/documents/BusinessSurveyFINALREPORT.pdf>

The major issues cited most were Newtown’s patchwork of sign regulations and their enforcement plus the lack of a clear road map for dealing with town officials on business issues. One anonymous respondent said, “I was not aware of the signage regulations and the town caused me unexpected and excessive strain to comply. ...I also do not agree with a single sign rule.”

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EDC Chairman Wes Thompson said “This survey is an important cornerstone for future EDC activity. Our plan is to target the primary wants and needs of business while encouraging the town’s great services and support organizations.”

The commission expects to present a series of recommendations for implementing the survey’s findings to the Board of Selectmen and Legislative Council for endorsement in January. Implementation of the dozen or so recommendations and conclusions dovetails nicely with a few EDC and Office of Economic and Community Development projects already under way.

The survey report, prepared by the WriteDesign Company of Newtown, contains an executive summary, a full analysis of the 20 questions asked, and a dozen or more major conclusions and recommendations. The report was unanimously accepted and endorsed by the full Economic Development Commission on Dec. 14.

Among the consultants’ conclusions:

--“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”

--“Although more than twice as many respondents said ‘no’ than ‘yes’ when asked if more public transportation or more affordable or low-cost housing in Newtown would help their businesses, significant numbers did support both.”

--“There are a wealth of opportunities to attract and retain (a wide range of) businesses” and 90 percent of respondents support neighborhood business centers such as the Sandy Hook and Borough design districts.

--A threat to business growth includes “the perception that the town does not go out of its way to promote or support local business,”

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### Survey results—3

WriteDesign's recommendations, as designed by managing partner Scott Brier, also include:

--"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."

--"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"

--"Create a 'meet the neighbors' program (with town-wide) events that enable businesses to showcase their products and services to local residents"

--"Launch a 'Marketing Newtown' effort ... including use of social media ... A number of respondents felt Newtown did not do a good enough job of promoting itself as a destination" for special events or specialty, craft and antique stores.

The Constant Contact online survey drew 150 responses from a broad cross section of businesses. The sample size assured a confidence level of 95 percent, Brier said. In addition, More than a half-dozen in-depth personal interviews were held with other businesses to insure diversity in responses. All respondents were allowed anonymity in order to insure candid answers.

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