



**Easton Economic Development Corporation**

**Report on July 23, 2020, Downtown Business Meeting to Consider Concepts to Activate  
Downtown during COVID-19**

## **Introduction**

The Easton Economic Development Corporation (EEDC) hosted a Downtown Business Meeting to discuss strategies to help downtown during COVID-19 at the request of the Town of Easton on July 23, 2020. Approximately 250 business and property owners from the target area were invited to participate. Of the seventy (70) attendees, about thirty-five (35) represented unique businesses in the target location.

The following report provides a detailed overview of the meeting process and outcomes. An Executive Summary with the findings can be found on page nine (9).

## **Process Description**

### *Invitation*

To ensure a fair process, the Easton Economic Development Corporation (EEDC) defined an area for targeted outreach to the business and property owners that would be most impacted by a downtown COVID-19 strategy. That area was defined as South Street from Harrison Street to Talbot Town Shopping Center, to West Street, including Washington Street. An invitation was mailed to every property owner in this target area. Invitations were hand-delivered to all businesses in the target area by Natalie Slater and Tracy Ward of the EEDC. In addition, a list of targeted businesses/parties was provided by the Easton Business Alliance and sent email invitations. It is estimated that a total of 250 invitations were delivered to the target audience.

### *Agenda and Process*

Due to COVID-19, the EEDC developed a meeting that could be attended in-person or via Zoom. Two technical consultants were hired to ensure that the meeting would work equally effectively regardless of in-person or online attendance. Through that technical assistance (Avalon Theater and Platinum PR), all in-room activities were visible to online participants and vice versa. Facilitated break-out sessions were managed both in person and online. Seven meeting facilitators were recruited to assist with the meeting—four in person and three online. The meeting was recorded.

The meeting format was designed to provide a range of opportunities for meeting participants to provide feedback.

All invitees were invited to present a “concept” for consideration at the meeting. Four (4) concepts were submitted for review. The Easton Business Alliance developed Concept 1 and Concept 2, Concept 3 was submitted by business and property owner, Stephen Mangasarian, and Blue Point Hospitality provided Concept 4.

The Easton Business Alliance prepared a PowerPoint presentation with their materials, developed slides to reflect Concept 3, and integrated Concept 4 into the final PowerPoint presentation (see attachment).

After introductory remarks by Lloyd “Scott” Beatty, Jr, the Chairman of the Easton Economic Development Corporation’s Board of Directors, Tracy Ward, EEDC Executive Director, led the participants through the meeting activities. Tracy clearly articulated that the meeting is part of a larger process by the Town and would not be a decision-making forum.

Attendees were asked to confirm three goals that were presented for consideration by the Easton Business Alliance (EBA). Tracy then invited each “Presenter” forward to present their proposed Concept. Each Presenter was given 3 minutes to lay out their plan. Presenters were Ross Benincasa, Discover Easton, Stephen Mangasarian, business and property owner, and Allie McGuckian and Matt Mason of Bluepoint Hospitality.

Tracy then broke the attendees into seven (7) facilitated break-out groups—four (4) in person and three (3) online. Facilitators were Val Cavalheri (EEDC staff), Martha Thomas (Flying Cloud Bookstore), Pam Keeton and Cassandra VanHooser (Talbot County Department of Economic Development and Tourism), Jeff Lankford (Easton Business Alliance), Anthony “Tony” Kern, EEDC Board of Directors, and Amy Kreiner (Talbot County Chamber of Commerce). After about 12-15 minutes of discussion, all parties reconvened to hear the reports from each break-out group. The three questions considered in the facilitated break out groups were:

- Which concept resonates with you the most, if any?
- What aspects of the concepts are most appealing to you and why?
- What aspects of the concepts are least appealing to you and why?

The last group activity entailed a “ranking and rating” activity that was conducted in real-time , both in room (by hand count) and online. Tracy emphasized that the results of this “survey” were to “take the temperature” of the room, not determine any final outcomes.

Tracy presented Concepts 1-4 and asked the following questions:

Is this Concept “acceptable,” “unacceptable,” or “acceptable with changes.” Data were captured through hand counts and surveys.

### *Outcome*

### Attendance

There were seventy (70) participants in the meeting in total. Thirty-eight (38) attended in person, and thirty-two (32) attended online. The list of attendees has been attached.

Of the 70 attendees, approximately thirty-five (35) represented unique businesses in the target location. A post-event [survey](#) of attendees with twenty-two responding (22) indicating:

- 58% were business owners and/or their representatives;
- 13.64% were property owners;
- 18.18% were government officials;
- 22.73% were non-profit organizations;
- 4.55% were “other,” such as a meeting facilitator.

### Goals & Objectives

Three goals were submitted for discussion by the Easton Business Alliance. There were:

1. *Bring People Safely Back Downtown:* We felt a need to give people a reason to come back downtown in a safe manner, whether that is through programming or our businesses;
2. *Sustain Our Restaurants & Retail Businesses:* There was and is a need to sustain our business community downtown during this pandemic and beyond.
3. *Open Space Development:* New data from Dr. Wadley highlights that outdoor dining is 18x safer than indoor dining during the pandemic. Encourage use of Main Street district as a space to be utilized by our locals.

Tracy asked for feedback on the goals and objectives.

- ✓ Tim Boyle: Owner of Vintage Books on Washington Street, thinks it is important in terms of bringing people downtown to delineate between bringing locals and bringing tourists;
- ✓ First goal: The word programming: what does that mean?
  - Ross answered the question: Programming is anything from music to events that can be safely space downtown. How do we bring people to our historic district in unique ways? Family movie night, etc.
- ✓ Define Main Street:
  - Ross: Academy Art Museum to Talbot Town Shopping to West by Courthouse, Post Office East.
- ✓ What data exists to support the fact that shops are suffering. Considering the pandemic restrictions, we are doing well and haven't seen a drop-off in regulars, just visitors.
  - Ross: That is true; some businesses are doing better. We are not seeing the visitors, and the fixed costs do not change during a pandemic. Our restaurants and even retailers are not seeing the revenue that they should be seeing.

### Presentation of Concepts

Concept #1: Presented by Ross Benincasa

- Weekend closure of Washington Street;
- Benefits: timing is beneficial to patrons, focused on a time when restaurants and retail are busiest;
- Concerns: safety concerns with closing and reopening streets, focused on one area of downtown.

Concept #2: Presented by Ross Benincasa

- Utilizes parallel parking spaces to expand restaurants outdoor in “parklets.”
- Benefits: minimal impact on traffic, enables pedestrian traffic, aesthetically pleasing
- Concerns: initial cost, no special event space created.

Concept #3: Presented by Stephen Mangasarian

- Closure of two full blocks of streets (E. Dover and Goldsborough between Harrison and Washington) plus lane closure of two streets 24/7 (N. Harrison southbound lane and N. Washington northbound lane);
- Benefits: safe barricades, electric transit vehicle to bring patrons to downtown.

Concept #4: Presented by Allie McGuckian and Matt Mason

- Beautification project that would draw people to Easton, outdoor entertainment in the park, art installations, social media push
- community building initiative using volunteers such as garden clubs, rotary clubs, YMCA, kid’s camps, mentor programs, schools, and community service.

#### Facilitated Break Outs:

Each facilitator reported out on the findings from their group. A summary of their findings is below. Results have been organized by topic, and comments from the seven (7) facilitated groups have been combined.

#### **Concept #1: Full street closure**

- ✓ There was zero support for closing Washington Street on the weekends or 24/7. There was concern it would advantage some businesses while disadvantaging others.

There was a reference to a “dead-zone” during the week in the core

- ✓ There was no support for partial street closures 24/7 or even on a limited basis unless there was some special event.
- ✓ Removing and putting back barriers is not the most sensible use of resources.
- ✓ Does not like any of the options, especially the ones involving the closure of streets, and doesn’t feel they are necessary. The issue is the pandemic, and until people feel safe going out, they will stay home.
- ✓ In favor of a weekend street closure plan and it does not have to be on Washington Street. Feels strongly that having 2-3 days a week with good event programming will be the best option to draw people downtown and less disruption than 24/7.

## Concept #2: Parklets

- ✓ There was support for limited parklets around town that didn't close off major sections of roadway . There was support for using our green spaces better and some of our parking lots for limited durations special events – a few hours or a few days depending on the event.
- ✓ Parklets is an excellent test of something working.
- ✓ #2 is acceptable. Totally against street closure. Beautification is needed. Prefer themes for the town. I.e., Holiday theme to draw people in
- ✓ #2 is well thought out and feasible and expandable.
- ✓ Parklets is a good concept for restaurants, but it doesn't create a big enough draw to bring more people into town that will stay and shop. Closing a street gives space for more activities that can bring out locals and tourists.
- ✓ The dining parklets can have an immediate impact for restaurants that need help now. It seems to be relatively inexpensive to set up temporarily, and it can grow into a more attractive concept for a long-term solution.
- ✓ Parklets did help “clean up” the sidewalks this past weekend on Washington Street. If expanded, it could also help create more space on sidewalks for foot traffic. Events can go in the parks.
- ✓ Not a fan of the parklet dining proposal. This solution works best in towns that have more housing and residential downtown.

## Concept #3: Full/Partial Closure of Downtown Area

- ✓ The four-street closure plan has the biggest potential for long-term impact. It could change the landscape of the district and have lots of benefits if done correctly.
- ✓ One person liked the long-term idea of shuttles on weekends.
- ✓ We ended up discussing #3 for the majority of the time because it's an interesting idea for a long-term strategy to bring people to Easton -- particularly with the idea of the **electric busses** (which people seemed to think are worth considering with or without road closures).
- ✓ For #3 to work, you'd have to ensure that businesses wouldn't be too inconvenienced when it comes to deliveries -- and also sales. I.e., an antique store where someone buys a big piece of furniture and needs to get it to their car.
- ✓ There was no support for re-directing traffic on one –way streets. There was support for some type of EV to shuttle people around.
- ✓ It seems the most costly and disruptive. It should be studied and discussed much further.
- ✓ Shuttling can solve many of the traffic issues we see and should be considered under any plan.
- ✓ 24/7 closure can be hard to program events for, but there is opportunity to have Mon-Wed be locals-focused, and Thurs-Sun be tourist-focused to maximize the usage and benefits.

#### Concept #4: A Town Beautification Initiative

- ✓ Everyone liked #4, beautification, and all believe that is something that should be implemented soon, possibly combined with one of the other ideas. And it would be a permanent change.
- ✓ There was exceptional support for an on-going, year-round, beautification program including flowers and other plantings. (*Side – note I've been trying to encourage EU to do more lighting events – similar to Talbot Goes Purple, the Holiday Lights, etc. It's beautiful and unique, and we could wrap fundraisers and awareness around that program*). Simple music on the weekends, not requiring bands or large setup was encouraged.
- ✓ Beautification should be done to make the town more attractive. It would be nice to keep the flowers and plants up to date throughout the seasons.
- ✓ This alone will not draw people downtown. This should be part of any plan that is adopted, but not the only plan we go with for downtown.
- ✓ #4 Putting out planters is not beneficial in generating foot traffic. Concept #4 is not a concept.
- ✓ Though everyone agrees that beautification is needed and welcome, some in the group believe that infrastructure is necessary first. "Get that right, and everything else will follow," one said.
- ✓ #4 not a plan. Wouldn't come to town to see flowers. Not 100% onboard about staying at home, we need to figure out a different way to adapt. See Cambridge.

#### General Commentary

- ✓ I think the most important takeaway from my group is that people wanted to see a long-term strategy for improving downtown foot traffic and drawing people (local and tourists) to the area. So, a plan that can be publicized as a \*new\* Easton should last beyond the pandemic. Plus, they like beautification and electric shuttle buses.
- ✓ One retailer who moved here from St. Michaels, believes we should have more mini-events (Valentine's Day, Springfest, etc.) Kicked off by something small that lingers as an attraction.
- ✓ Another member of the group said, "We are hemorrhaging, and we need help now." Waiting for a complete redesign of the infrastructure is not acceptable to most.
- ✓ Also, there was a universal call for open container law changes, along with the acknowledgment that this is an uphill battle. (No one said they wanted open carry, as was erroneously reported at the meeting.)
- ✓ The group declined to vote on the ideas presented but agreed quickly that a hybrid approach combining three of the four ideas was their preference.
  - 1) Parklets (Plan #2)
  - 2) Partial Street Closures as proposed in Plan #3
  - 3) Beautification (Plan #4)

- ✓ Suggestions for programming were abundant. Ideas included a dog contest, a fashion show, blues concert, painting contests (outside Plein Air), and food contests. “I imagine a time where there are activities going on all the time,” one group member said. “We need to concentrate on getting people to town.”
- ✓ While most were restaurateurs, there was a desire to see whatever plan is implemented help all downtown businesses.
- ✓ Finally, the group seemed to agree that whatever we do now will set the stage for the fall when people will want to be outside and should begin quickly.
  - 1) Cost and ease of setup: Beautification, parklets, weekend street closure, full closure.
  - 2) Most significant business impact (good or bad): Full closure, weekend street closure, parklets, beautification
- ✓ Group consensus: We should not think of these plans as one or the other. Let’s think of them as stages. Beautify now. Let’s have the restaurants that want parklets be able to have them with temporary setup. Then focus on event weekends that require a street to close and then do the research and really look into fulltime closures and more permanent parklet aesthetics. Let’s get this right before the fall.
- ✓ This needs to be looked at short term vs. long term.
- ✓ All the options need a lot of planning, especially those that close streets.
- ✓ Among things that will need careful planning is handicap access.
- ✓ Support selective closures for events that bring people in, like Fire & Ice.

Two invited guests provided comments prior to the meeting:

- ✓ Create a marketing campaign targeting visitors: “Need a day out? Come stroll the tree lined streets of an historic Maryland town, Easton. Spend a day exploring the beautiful downtown district of unique boutiques, high quality art galleries, and fabulous eateries. The town boasts an accredited art museum, the Academy Art Museum, as well as a vibrant Historical Society Museum. There is truly something in Easton that appeals to everyone. Easy access from the western shore as well as neighboring states.”
- ✓ Provide & market Easton as having the safest and most friendly environment to conduct business in Maryland during COVID-19. Energize Downtown during COVID-19: The Town of Easton {would provide} sanitizer stands & wash stands throughout downtown plus distribution stations of masks with {six} 6-foot distancing markers throughout. The Town Council should make Easton a Mask Mandatory environment. Creative & flexible additions to existing business plans during COVID-19: {For example} Restaurants {provide} Grab & Go areas in their restaurants that are akin to the Grab & Go sections of Grocer Markets. Not just a to go menu, but fresh Grab & Go meals that can be easily frozen too.

## Ranking and Rating

Once the Facilitators provided their feedback, Tracy then asked all attendees (government officials and facilitators did not participate) to “vote” by way of raising their hand (in person) or through an online survey (online) for each concept. Tracy emphasized that the “vote” is for “temperature taking” to see if there are any strong preferences. The results of the combined voting are below:

	<b>Concept 1</b>	<b>Concept 2</b>	<b>Concept 3</b>	<b>Concept 4</b>
Acceptable	0	17	8	33
Unacceptable	28	0	13	1
Acceptable with Adjustments	5	19	21	3

## **Executive Summary**

The Easton Economic Development Corporation (EEDC) hosted a Downtown Business Meeting to discuss strategies to help downtown during COVID-19 at the request of the Town of Easton on July 23, 2020. Approximately 250 business and property owners from the target area were invited to participate. Of the seventy (70) attendees, about thirty-five (35) represented unique businesses in the target location. Approximately 14% of the attendees were property owners in the target area. Meeting “invitees” were provided an opportunity to suggest “concepts” for presentation. Four (4) Concepts were proposed for consideration. Attendees agreed upon three goals to aid downtown during this time: *Bring People Safely Back Downtown*, *Sustain Our Restaurants & Retail Businesses*, and *Open Space Development* to accommodate diners. Concepts were discussed in small group facilitated sessions to provide an opportunity for feedback.

The findings are summarized here:

- There is support for strategies that could be implemented in a phased approach way— short term, mid-term and long-term;
- Concept #1, the closure of Washington Street on weekends was widely rejected due to the potential for disruption and the likelihood that it will not benefit all businesses in downtown;
- Concept #2, the parklets, is widely considered acceptable and could occur relatively immediately with investment;
- Concept #3, 24/7 streets closure plus the electric transit vehicle, was widely appreciated for the electric transit vehicle concept but largely rejected for any street closures;

- Concept #4, a Beautification project for Easton, was widely favored as a concept that could be implemented relatively quickly, inexpensively, and could help “build” community. Some felt that the concept would not drive additional foot traffic.

During the facilitated break-outs, the following was shared by the group facilitators:

- ✓ “I think the most important takeaway from my group is that people wanted to see a long-term strategy for improving downtown foot traffic and drawing people (local and tourists) to the area.”
- ✓ “We should not think of these plans as one or the other. Let’s think of them as stages. Beautify now. Let’s have the restaurants that want parklets be able to have them with a temporary setup. Then focus on event weekends that require a street to close and then do the research and really look into fulltime closures and more permanent parklet aesthetics. Let’s get this right before the fall.”
- ✓ “The group seemed to agree that whatever we do now will set the stage for the fall when people will want to be outside and should begin quickly.” Factors to consider: Cost and ease of setup: Beautification, parklets, weekend street closure, full closure; Most significant business impact (good or bad): Full closure, weekend street closure, parklets, beautification.
- ✓ “Suggestions for programming were abundant. Ideas included a dog contest, a fashion show, blues concert, painting contests (outside Plein Air), and food contests. ‘I imagine a time where there are activities going on all the time,’ one group member said. ‘We need to concentrate on getting people to town.’”

