

Story: Forum to float ideas to shape future of town

Forum to float ideas to shape future of town 01:00 AM EST on Friday, December 8, 2006 By Alex Kuffner

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BRISTOL -- When Diana B. Campbell moved back to Bristol from Hopkinton, Mass., two years ago, she set about getting involved again in the community where she'd previously lived for 30 years.

She won a seat last month on the Bristol Warren Regional School Committee. But what's taking up most of her time these days is organizing a two-day charrette in March that will bring together 150 residents, business owners and officials to have a freewheeling discussion about the development of the town and settle upon a direction for the future.

The idea for the event, "Voices for Bristol's Future," came from a similar forum held in Hopkinton. Campbell participated in that meeting and saw firsthand how citizens could come up with innovative ideas about their town.

With Bristol transforming from a working-class mill town to a more affluent bedroom community for Providence, she says it's the perfect time to consider the town's direction.

She talked about the forum yesterday at a meeting of Preserve Bristol, a community group that led the effort to control chain stores in the downtown historic district.

"You need to be a participant in the community that you live in," Campbell said. "A community is most successful when people are a part of it, not just watchers."

The forum is set to be held March 2 and 3 at Mt. Hope High School and will cost \$20,000 to stage. Financing is coming from private donations and grants from nonprofits.

Half the participants at the event will be either town officials or representatives of different civic groups. The other half will be townspeople with no connection to organized groups. Over the two days, they'll break into small groups and brainstorm together.

The forum doesn't intend to come up with a strict development plan. Instead, Campbell said, the goal is to give a diverse group of people a chance to discuss the future. The ideas generated by the meeting will be presented to the Town Council.

Diane Williamson, director of community development, said it could be a useful tool for updating the town's Comprehensive Plan, a state-mandated document to guide growth. What comes out of the forum could be used to either reaffirm the plan or amend it.

"I think people need to know we have been working toward a vision," Williamson said at yesterday's meeting in the Burnside Building. "Is that where people still want to go?"

But James W. Farley, chairman of the Planning Board, preached caution. Though he applauded the idea of civic engagement, he said that not all proposals that come out of the forum may be feasible.

Moreover, drawing comparisons to Hopkinton may not be applicable, he said. Bristol may not need radical change.

"People fight to come to Bristol," he said. "We like our town."

More information on the forum can be found on the Web by visiting www.voicesforbristol.com.