

**PUBLIC FORUM  
C-1 COMMERCIAL DISTRICT  
MARCH 10, 2014**

Mayor Cerino called the public forum to order at 7:04 p.m. at the Big Mixx barbershop and salon in Kent Plaza. In attendance were Council Members Liz Gross, Linda Kuiper, Samuel T. Shoge and Mauritz Stetson, W. S. Ingersoll, Town Manager, Jennifer Mulligan, Town Clerk and guests.

Mayor Cerino welcomed all in attendance and had the Council introduce themselves.

Mayor Cerino stated that the meeting was called tonight to begin a dialogue with the business community and create synergy between the Town leaders and business owners.

Mayor Cerino stated that the location of Big Mixx was chosen in part to do things a little differently, but also to show support for an African American owned business in Chestertown.

In the audience were Pete Heck of the Kent County News, Bill Washington, Gloria Needle, Pam Cleary, John Cleary, Marvin Starks (owner of floor care business), Jamie Barrett (owner of Big Mixx), Janey Barrett (owner of Jab Cab), Ellsworth Tolliver, Todd Strong (owner of Chestertown Lumber), Penny Kelly and Ed Kelly (owners of Sears), Michael Lane, Deborah Lane, and Harold Salverda.

Mayor Cerino stated that economic times had been tight and Chestertown was not immune to national trends. He asked for opinions for what government could do to improve business in the C-1 part of Town.

Mr. Washington stated that in order for business to flourish there had to be creation of business/industrial job opportunities. He said that Chestertown was a service community only. He said that businesses have left but none have come in to replace them. Mr. Washington stated that until there were people working full-time jobs other businesses would suffer.

Mr. Ingersoll stated that before the economy crashed there was a full time Economic Development office in Kent County who would look for new industry to come to the area. He said that small businesses were the backbone of the Town but there were several larger industries that have come and gone. He said the retention of business/industry was equally important as attracting new industry. He said that more permanent jobs were always needed and he said that perhaps the County could get back into having a "separate" economic development to attract industry to Kent County. Mr. Ingersoll stated that a committed workforce was also necessary and training for jobs would be helpful.

Mayor Cerino stated that the Town had a chapter of SCORE which offered advice on beginning a business. He said that although people do go to them to start businesses, few have the capital needed to get that business started.

Mayor Cerino stated that there was not much wiggle room in the budget for tax breaks to new businesses. He said the Town's tax base was small due to the large number of non-profits. He asked if anyone had ideas or suggestions to find new businesses.

Mr. Tolliver asked about broadband internet in the area. Mr. Ingersoll stated that ARRA funds were utilized to bring a trunk line of fiber optic down Rt. 213, Cross Street, and across the river into Queen Anne's County to continue along Rt. 213. He said that the County received ancillary grants and wired out to the Public Works building on Rt. 291, to the jail on Flatland Road, and underground to Rock Hall. He said that the Maryland Broadband Cooperative should develop opportunities to push the fiber optic into "the last mile".

Mr. Tolliver asked about Wi-Fi availability. Mr. Ingersoll stated that the Wi-Fi in the downtown was funded by a Community Legacy grant. He said that Wi-Fi was certainly possible for the C-1 area, but it had never been suggested or requested. He asked if Wi-Fi in the parking lots would help Kent Plaza or Washington Square, explaining that although some street front businesses may be able to capture Wi-Fi Downtown, its use was not meant for free internet to businesses. The Wi-Fi was meant for tourism on the streets and in the parks and that was why it was installed in the central downtown area.

Ms. Kuiper stated that Senator Mikulski met with the Kent County Commissioners and other people on the Eastern Shore. She said that there was discussion about making Kent County a pilot program for high-speed internet. She said that people should go to the County Commissioner's meetings and be heard. The Kent County Commissioner's met each Tuesday at 6:00 p.m. at 400 High Street.

Ms. Cleary stated that one of the problems was that most people did not know of all the available services in the community. She said that she thought access to those services was important. She suggested a form of public transportation was needed.

Mayor Cerino stated that there was a Task Force report on suggestions for revitalizing the Town and a trolley was a part of that discussion, which he thought was an interesting idea.

Mr. Ingersoll stated that there was a Delmarva Transit bus service in Town but its schedule was not very well known. Mr. Ingersoll stated that in the summer months with school out, the Town provided transportation to the Kent County Community Center in Worton so that they can participate in the programs offered by Kent County Parks and Recreation.

Ms. Cleary stated that there were families with children in this area who were marginalized and living in poverty and neglected. She said that services needed to be more accessible to residents. Ms. Cleary also said that there was not enough accessible recreation for children in the area.

Ms. Kuiper stated that the Town gave \$10,000.00 to Kent County Parks and Recreation for children who cannot afford the programs. In addition, the Town paid for transportation back and forth to the County community center in Worton.

Mr. Shoge asked Mr. Starks if he was interested in having his own business space. Mr. Starks stated that he was not quite ready for that as his business was just beginning. He said that his work is mainly advertised through business cards and he was keeping busy that way.

Mr. Starks stated that he thought the community should support existing businesses because if they did, they would then hire more employees.

Mr. Shoge stated that he thought there were small businesses in the community who did not know ways to advertise. He suggested a central body for advertising help.

Mayor Cerino asked how a more positive business environment could be created. Mr. Strong stated that most businesses in Town were service oriented. He said in order for more people to come to Town there had to be more jobs available and more things to keep a family here. He said that before a customer walks into his business, they are paying 6% more than if they drove 35-minutes to Middletown, Delaware.

Mr. Ingersoll stated that it was not always cheaper to go out of Town to shop. He said that local business had to be supported. Mr. Strong stated that the problem is that people go to Middletown to shop because they also go out to eat at a restaurant that Chestertown does not have and to buy other items that were not available in Chestertown.

Mr. Stetson stated that there was a shrinking population of consumers in Chestertown. He said that he thought the businesses were constrained by the population and the people who did live here had to be convinced that they were not saving money by going to Delaware to shop.

Mr. Tolliver stated that if you have a family on a limited income, people are going to go where they can get the bulk of what they need for the best price. He said that although gas may be expensive to get there, the overall savings can be worth the trip.

Mr. Kelly stated that when he lived in New Jersey, the city had an Enterprise Zone where you could shop tax free in certain areas. He said that he thought the State could lower the tax rate which would change business in the area. Ms. Kuiper stated that Delaware had a merchant's tax which was added to items before the final cost, so the consumer paid it.

Mr. Tolliver stated that the Town had to decide whether they were going to expand and grow or remain a service community and cater more to the retirement community.

Mr. Shoge asked if there was dialogue between all the Towns in the County and Ms. Bowman, who was in charge of the Economic Development Department in Kent County. Ms. Kuiper stated that the Council of Governments met monthly. Mr. Ingersoll stated that the Town did pay County taxes and he thought that Ms. Bowman could occasionally come before the Mayor and Council and review her efforts involving the Chestertown economy.

Ms. Kuiper stated that CreaFill Fibers came to Kent County on tax incentives.

Mayor Cerino stated that he has heard comments that the Town should invest in the C-1 area of Town like they do in the downtown. He said that a challenge with the shopping centers was that they were privately owned. He said that it was not in the purview of the Town Council to make improvements because it was private property. Mayor Cerino stated that people may be under the impression that the Mayor and Council only cares about the Downtown, but they were really looking after Town-owned properties.

Mr. Kelly stated that his rent is triple net and when the Town pressures the property owner to plant trees the tenant is the one that pays for it. He said that he rents 7% of the shopping center and 20% of the Ames Store and it was difficult to explain how much was spent on maintenance.

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Mayor Cerino stated that the Town government also took the blame when a shopping center looks run down and it was frustrating when work was needed, but also limited in what the government could step in and do.

A gentleman in the audience asked what the Town was doing in the way of reentry programs for convicts. He said that the jail was in Town limits, but none of the local businesses would hire someone who had been convicted of a felony. Mr. Tolliver stated that an initiative could be taken on between the faith based community and local government to help with that issue.

Ms. Cleary stated that sometimes those who have been incarcerated need habilitation rather than rehabilitation. She said that they need to learn marketable skills for the real world.

Mr. Tolliver stated that he would like to see the discussions continue. Mayor Cerino stated that this was the first meeting in a series of forums. He said that the Council would meet with C-2 Downtown Commercial in April and continue on from that point.

The forum closed at 8:15 p.m.

Submitted by:

  
Jennifer Mulligan  
Town Clerk

Approved by:

Chris Cerino  
Mayor