

# POSSIBLE DREAMS 2012: “Bridge to Bridge and Beyond”

## Summary of Preliminary Findings

February 1, 2012

Team Haverhill will issue a series of reports on the January 30 “Possible Dreams” meeting. A great deal of material—especially from the tabletop worksheets—remains to be collated and summarized. Comments are also continuing to flow in regarding ideas discussed at the tables, and ideas are still percolating in people’s minds. Once the ideas are gathered, it will take a few months to see which ideas have “legs”—that is, which proposals are championed by energetic leaders and volunteers, people who are prepared to follow through to some near term goals.

This initial report summarizes five key “messages” we heard during the last hour of the meeting, when participants reflected on their three rounds of table conversation. Specific comments from that segment are listed at the end of this report.

### **MESSAGE # 1: Link up two big Haverhill assets—“culture” and “agriculture”**

Participants at Possible Dreams 2012 offered a fresh take on what makes Haverhill distinctive. They called for a stronger link between “farming” and “culture, recreation and tourism.”

One newer resident of the city called our agricultural sector, which includes eight working farms, Haverhill’s undiscovered “gold mine” of resources for local recreation and regional tourism. With the “slow food” movement in full swing, Haverhill could link together and promote related assets, such as farms, wineries, brewery, and restaurants. Packages could be created that combine elements like farm tours, tastings, restaurant visits, and food-related programs or conferences. Haverhill could turn an old factory space into a “test kitchen” venue. As farmers in Haverhill begin to work together more closely, through vehicles like the revived Bradford Grange, the potential for promoting our agricultural sector is increased.

Haverhill has already developed a reputation for good restaurants. One next step might be a Restaurant Week. After the meeting, one participating farmer suggested that local produce could be featured as part of such an event—a distinctive Haverhill spin on the Restaurant Week model. Another young resident suggested special promotions to NECC students, who might use a long break between classes to come downtown and eat, perhaps hopping onto the public bus that many students are not aware of.

Good food combines naturally with arts and culture activities. In places people really like to go, the combination of these two elements strengthens the draw for both. One participant described Haverhill as being distinctive because it combines these two strengths. The agriculture-culture combination could be further developed, packaged and marketed.

### **MESSAGE #2: Create new downtown venues for arts, culture and recreation**

To strengthen the “culture” side of the equation, there was a call for new arts and culture venues in this “bridge to bridge” area—a theme that has emerged at Possible Dreams for the past five years and is still gaining momentum. Ideas included:

- Use the Woolworth property for something like the Firehouse Center in Newburyport—a combined performance and gallery venue on the riverfront.
- Survey the Merrimack Valley to discover what is not available now that would bring people in our direction. One idea was an aquarium. Another was either a science museum or a children’s museum—or both combined in the same venue.

- Develop a residential artist colony combined with an arts center. Offer pods or storefronts where people can see artists at work. Hold a sculpture symposium and place major sculptures along the river.
- Welcome visitors into the action with a boutique hotel or a hostel right downtown.
- Don't ignore the asset we already have in City Hall Auditorium. Might be suitable for classic movies, music events, possibly live theater.

### **MESSAGE #3: Work on “curb appeal”—make this area attractive, clean, unified and connected**

Another cluster of comments focused on the overall appearance and usability of the “bridge to bridge” area. Ideas included:

- Improve the overall “curb appeal”—not only with new sidewalks and plantings, but also with new public investment in maintenance and cleanliness. Volunteer efforts are great, but not sufficient to create a consistently appealing downtown experience. Stay on top of graffiti, and take care of the trees.
- Make sure there are unifying architectural elements—either some stylistic features that are repeated in different buildings, or a big architectural feature (like a gateway) that pulls things together visually, or both.
- Make even more use of vacant storefront space. Art in the storefronts is a great start. Create “pop-up shops” featuring locally-based producers, like Southwick, Cedars, and Swix, so that residents can easily purchase items that are made here.
- Work on “filling the holes”—not just filling up empty buildings, but also filling gaps in the spectrum of retail establishments. With more people living downtown, there may be demand for all kinds of retail. Why force people to go to the mall?
- On the theme of “connections,” one participant expressed a hope that the rail trail wouldn't stop at the bridge, but would extend all the way to Georgetown. Another participant suggested a “Whittier Trail,” with poems on plaques at sites mentioned in them—a trail people could bike as well as drive.
- Create a sign—visible as you come across the Basiliere Bridge into Haverhill—that tells you what activities are happening this week

### **MESSAGE #4: Make it family-friendly**

Participant mentioned that the downtown festivals are the only occasions when it makes sense to bring their children—otherwise the activities and venues are all geared to adults. Participants said:

- Create specific places that are well-designed for children.
- Develop ongoing activities that can engage the whole family.
- Make better use of existing spaces, even the smaller ones.
- Consider a dog park, near the bridge and rail trail, and other uses of public space to draw people together for recreation.

### **MESSAGE #5: Create a unified marketing plan, communicating a coherent identity for Haverhill's “Bridge to Bridge” area.**

This is another theme that has surfaced before at Possible Dreams. Haverhill needs to tell its story in a more compelling way—weaving key assets into a coherent message about what we have to offer. And we need to tell this story, consistently and clearly, over time.

**List of Specific Comments Offered by Participants  
and Recorded on Chart-Pads in the Large-Group Segment**

(Last hour of the meeting)

- Extend the Rail Trail to Georgetown
- More activities for families and children downtown, especially after hours
- Establish a consistent architectural theme—possibly repeated stylistic elements, possibly a “big” feature like a gateway
- Haverhill is sitting on a “gold mine”—potential for agricultural tourism. Slow food and related movements. [Represented \$5.3 million in 2010. Source not cited.] Link together assets like farms, wineries, brewery. Connect to commuters. Tour the farms. Feature restaurants, tastings, conference, test kitchen.
- In all our planning, think about what would be unique to Haverhill (at least in this region) that would draw people from the outside, such as an aquarium? A science or children’s museum. Both combined?
- Haverhill’s arts as a “draw.” Music hall and performance space. Artist colony and arts center. Pods or storefronts with artists at work. Combined with a boutique hotel or hostel downtown.
- Create pop-up shops featuring locally-based producers, like Southwick, Cedars, Swix. Use an empty storefront to make a place we could actually purchase what is made here.
- Be sure to connect the good ideas with each other.
- We need a cohesive marketing plan, brand and identity.
- Maintain buildings and landscapes downtown—and keep them clean—without relying so much on volunteers.
- Work on curb appeal for Merrimack Street.
- Build a sign for people coming across the [Basiliere] Bridge to let people know: “This week in Haverhill...”
- People are able and willing to spend money downtown. Good progress on Washington Street, but fill the “holes”—need more variety of retail.
- Develop a theme for the Washington, Wingate, Essex Street area
- Like the art in empty storefronts!
- Don’t turn Woolworth into a parking garage. Something like the Firehouse Center in Newburyport—performance and gallery space.
- Hold a sculpture symposium—place sculpture along the river.
- Have a “Restaurant Week.”
- Create a “Whittier Trail”—put poems on plaques at sites mentioned—a trail people could bike as well as drive.
- Connect with the student population—NECC—the bus from campus to downtown isn’t well known. Publicize it and offer a deal for college students to eat during long breaks between classes.
- Bradford Grange is organizing farmers now. Form an Agricultural Commission. There are 5 farms that must remain agricultural in use because they sold development rights to the state.
- More park areas that bring people together around an activity. Improve existing lighted spaces (even smaller ones). Consider a dog park—perhaps near the bridges and rail trail. Consider community gardens.
- Take pride in our community’s distinctive combination of assets
  - Agriculture—both history and present farming activity
  - Culture—both history and present talent—“community arts center”
- Curb appeal—stay on top of graffiti quickly. Take care of our trees (perhaps people adopt them)
- “I drive to the Merrimack Rep in Lowell and the Screening Room in Newburyport—why not here?”
  - Consider City Hall Auditorium as a venue for old movies, music, possibly theater productions.