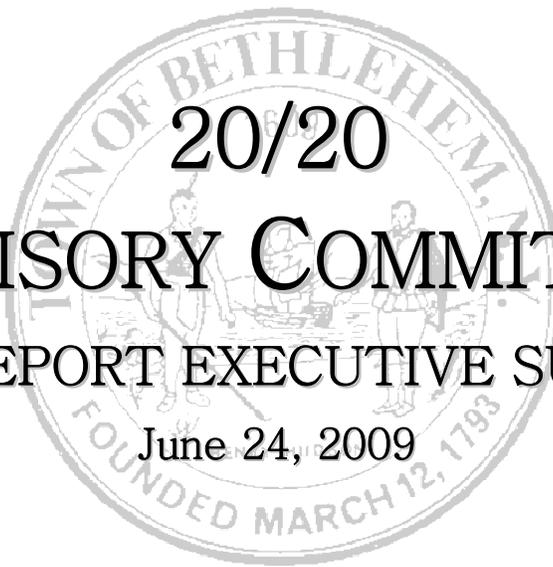


**Town of Bethlehem, New York**



**20/20**  
**ADVISORY COMMITTEE**  
**FINAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
June 24, 2009

Terri Egan and Ken Ringler  
20/20 Advisory Committee Co-Chairs



**Presented to the Bethlehem Town Board:**

John H. Cunningham, Supervisor

Joann Dawson

Mark Hennessey

Kyle Kotary

Sam Messina

## LETTER FROM THE 20/20 ADVISORY COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS

June 24, 2009

Dear Supervisor Cunningham and Members of the Town Board:

We are very pleased to deliver the Final Report of the Bethlehem 20/20 Advisory Committee. Over the past eighteen months, a group of dedicated Town residents has convened on a monthly basis to develop a better understanding of the issues, opportunities and challenges that the Town of Bethlehem is confronting. We have enjoyed learning more about the many wonderful programs and services that the Town provides. We have also had the pleasure of getting to know the many fine professional women and men who lead Town departments, programs and facilities.

By appointing the 20/20 Committee in January 2008, the Town was proactive in addressing some of the significant fiscal and operational challenges that it could see on the horizon. Little did any of us know at the time that the world's economy would experience the tumultuous downturn that occurred later that year. Consequently, there are no easy fixes to ensuring a sustainable Town government for the foreseeable future. Difficult choices remain to be made to relieve the fiscal burden of government on Town residents.

The Committee's mission was to involve key stakeholders in a community-wide conversation about the long-term strategic direction of the Town (as an institution) and to provide broad-based guidance and direction to the Town Board as it faces the many challenges and difficult decisions ahead. We have used the diverse experience and interests of our committee, interactions with Town staff, public interaction and a community survey as the basis for developing our recommendations. We have tried to codify key values of our community into guiding principles that the Town Board should consider when making difficult decisions. We have also provided recommendations with regard to specific actions the Town can take to become more sustainable.

We would like to recognize and thank the twenty-six men and women for their voluntary participation on the Committee. We also are grateful for the tremendous cooperation and support we received from Supervisor Cunningham and his senior staff. Hopefully, all participants have benefitted from the experience. We also want to thank the Elsmere Fire District for graciously hosting the monthly advisory committee meetings at its West Poplar Drive Station.

In conclusion, the entire committee recognizes that we are fortunate to live in a wonderful community that has been well served by its Town government. However, the challenges that lie ahead are of historic proportions. There has never been a time when the value and importance of citizen involvement in Town government is more critical. A better informed and engaged citizenry can lead to an even better and more sustainable future. We are grateful for the opportunity to have served the Town as Co-Chairs of the 20/20 Advisory Committee.



Terri Egan, Co-Chair



Ken Ringler, Co-Chair

## ***MESSAGE FROM THE 20/20 COMMITTEE: THE TIME FOR ACTION IS NOW***

The Town of Bethlehem is a special place to live. It balances suburban and semi-rural settings with accessibility to employment, shopping, entertainment, culture and the recreational assets of the Capital Region. The Town is also recognized for its high quality schools and neighborhoods and is one of the safest communities in the region. Nonetheless, like many other local governments, the Town faces difficult challenges about future growth, fiscal responsibility, infrastructure investment and services. There is a documented need to re-invest in the Town's basic infrastructure yet the Town faces a future in which operating revenues are projected to grow at a much slower pace than expenses. And, the situation is further complicated by the fact that the Town's tax base is disproportionately supported by residential land uses. In the face of these challenges, the Town government must immediately pursue initiatives that can yield the resources required for re-investing in basic infrastructure including water and sewer systems, highways and public facilities. As an alternative to the ever unpopular process of raising property taxes, the Town must find ways to increase revenues and reduce costs so that necessary infrastructure investments can be made.

During the 20/20 process, the understanding of how a typical Town property owner's annual tax obligation is allocated was very enlightening to the members. As illustrated by the pie charts included in Appendix 2, 12% of a property owner's annual property taxes support the many services provided by Town government. This includes, among other things, highway maintenance, parks and recreation, police and public safety, senior services and operation of public water and sewer systems. It is within this context that the Committee is making recommendations regarding **Fiscal Sustainability, Economic Development, Modernizing Town Government, and Cooperation among Taxing Jurisdictions**. Many of these recommendations are inter-related and can be advanced on parallel paths.

In looking ahead to the year 2020, it is very clear that the time for action is now. There is no simple solution to the fiscal issues facing the Town, so the Town must begin moving down solution paths immediately. Along with each of our recommendations we have suggested an implementation timetable. Further, to initiate the important work that lies ahead, the Committee recommends the following three-point approach to immediately implementing its recommendations:

1. **Develop and implement a Town-wide economic development strategy.** Encourage responsible economic growth that is consistent with the Town's Comprehensive Plan. While attraction of new businesses to the Town is desirable, retention of the Town's existing industry is critical;
2. **Work together with all the taxing jurisdictions that provide services to Town residents and businesses to pursue opportunities for more efficient and effective service delivery and for integration of financial and capital planning.** An intergovernmental working group should be assembled to implement this recommendation. As a first initiative, the Committee encourages the working group to consider a joint approach to economic development. The direct and indirect revenue streams that can result from responsible economic development are critical to the fiscal sustainability of all the taxing jurisdictions that serve Town residents. They should therefore participate jointly and share the burdens and benefits of economic development.
3. **Assess opportunities for improving the Town's organization and operations.** A non-partisan advisory group of Town residents should be established to assist the Town in an undertaking to evaluate certain organizational issues. This should include consideration of the following: consolidation of Town departments and functions, distinguishing between essential and non-

essential services, the development of a comprehensive financial strategy, development of a capital plan and the benefits of professionalizing some elected offices.

It is our belief that the Town government should move forward with these initiatives over the next twelve months. We would respectfully request that the Town periodically report back to the community on its progress in this regard.

As residents of the Town, we benefit from quality services provided by the various taxing jurisdictions that we support with property taxes. Given the fiscal realities that are well documented, it has become increasingly clear to us that our taxing jurisdictions have a responsibility to pursue increased cooperation and interaction that can result in more efficient and effective public services. It is also clear that the involvement of our residents is critical as engaged and informed Town citizens can be of great value as our taxing jurisdictions confront the difficult choices that lie ahead. The 20/20 initiative has been an informative and spirited exercise and we are encouraged that our government has participated in this important conversation about the sustainability of programs, services and facilities.

### ***THE 20/20 ADVISORY COMMITTEE & SUB-COMMITTEES***

The twenty-six-member 20/20 Advisory Committee was established by the Town Board in January 2008 and former Town Supervisors Terri Egan and Ken Ringler were appointed Co-Chairs. Staff support of the Committee was provided by Supervisor John H. Cunningham, Town Comptroller Suzanne Traylor, Confidential Secretary Kim Ryan, and former Town employees Judi Kehoe and George Leveille. Three sub-committees were established: the Communications Sub-Committee, chaired by John Piechnik; the Community Survey Sub-Committee, chaired by Pamela Clark Robbins; and, the Financial Modeling Sub-Committee, chaired by George Leveille. The Committee held regularly scheduled monthly meetings as well as numerous sub-committee meetings between February 2008 and June 2009.

### ***THE 20/20 ADVISORY COMMITTEE MISSION STATEMENT***

The Committee adopted the following mission statement:

“The establishment of the 20/20 Committee will provide the Town with a vehicle to involve key community stakeholders and to stimulate a community-wide conversation focused on the long-term strategic direction of the Town. The mission of the 20/20 committee will be to provide the Town Board with recommendations on key policy decisions to ensure that it maximizes the potential to achieve the Comprehensive Plan’s community vision for the year 2020. Among other things, this initiative is designed to cultivate leadership, identify issues and opportunities, focus efforts, build consensus, guide decision-making, and help the Town Board establish priorities.”

### ***THE 20/20 ADVISORY COMMITTEE VISION STATEMENT***

In accordance with its mission statement and work plan, the Committee established a vision statement for the desired “condition” of the Town government in the year 2020. The vision statement is as follows:

“In the year 2020, the Town of Bethlehem is a model municipality and a dynamic organization that has evolved to meet the changing needs of the community. It maximizes the utility of its resources and is an efficient, effective and responsive organization serving

its residents and businesses. The Town utilizes sustainable practices, cutting edge technology and green design to continuously improve its high quality, modern facilities. The Town operates under a sound financial plan and utilizes asset based management practices. It builds and maintains infrastructure that supports a diverse and modern commercial and industrial base. The Town workforce is a highly trained, motivated, accountable and productive resource to the community. The Town Government conducts its business in an open and participatory manner fostering collaborative relationships, welcoming diversity and cultivating an informed and involved citizenry.”

## ***GUIDING PRINCIPLES***

A common element of strategic planning exercises like this initiative is the development of guiding principles, which reflect consensus among the Committee members with respect to key shared community “values” that help to guide decision-making. The Committee established guiding principles with regard to the following:

- Adaptability;
- Sustainability;
- Cooperation among Taxing Jurisdictions;
- Communications and Citizen Involvement;
- Fiscal Responsibility; and,
- Diversity.

## ***FINANCIAL ANALYSIS***

Camoin Associates was retained by the Town to develop a Tax Base Analysis that considered three long-range development scenarios. The purpose of this exercise was to assist in understanding the fiscal impact of land use decisions on the Town’s budget. The following are the key findings of the analysis:

- The Town’s tax base is primarily residential, with over 80% of the Town’s taxable assessed value in residential property;
- The average household in the Town requires \$1,860 more in services than it pays in property taxes;
- Non-residential property makes up about 20% of the total taxable value but provides a significant subsidy to Town residents by generating revenues that are far greater than the services it consumes;
- The projected acceleration of Town expenses exceeds the rate of growth in revenues, an unsustainable trend;
- New non-residential development can contribute to closing the gap between revenues and expenditures;

- Economic development alone cannot resolve the structural imbalance in the Town budget, other resources and approaches must be pursued or services must be curtailed in order to sustain core government services;
- Consideration should be given to the use of agreements between the Town and other taxing jurisdictions to assist the Town in making required investments which benefit the community and provide essential improvements required to facilitate growth.

### ***COMMUNITY SURVEY***

With the voluntary assistance of Policy Research Associates, Inc., the 20/20 Committee conducted a random sample survey of 1,500 Bethlehem residents who had voted in recent local elections to learn about their priorities and reactions to many of the pressing issues facing the Town. The survey was mailed on March 31, 2009 and 331 survey forms were returned, a response rate of 22%, which constitutes an acceptable response rate. The following are key highlights of the survey:

- 74% of the respondents were older than 50, 57% lived in Delmar or Elsmere, 92% owned their home, and on average, the respondents have lived in the Town for 26 years;
- 78% felt that the quality of life in Bethlehem was better than in other places in the region;
- Respondents most liked about the Town its services, especially public safety and highways and least liked taxes and certain types of development, especially “big box” stores;
- Respondents ranked most Town services, especially emergency services and water and sewer, as being important and meeting or exceeding expectations. Although the ratings were still high, support of business and economic development as well as pedestrian and bicycle improvements were somewhat below expectations;
- The majority of respondents believe that Town programs and services are appropriate and should be maintained at current levels;
- Most respondents believe that the Town should seek new outside funding to support new programs and services and few would support a tax increase for the same purpose;
- A significant majority of respondents believe that the Town’s priority for investment should be its water and sewer systems;
- In terms of alternative ways to pay for needed improvements, respondents thought that the best alternatives were distinguishing between essential and non-essential services, charging user fees for non-essential services, and encouraging appropriately planned non-residential development; and,
- The overwhelming majority of respondents support consolidation or sharing of services with other taxing jurisdictions and would be willing to give up Town control where there is documentable savings or service improvements.

### ***20/20 RECOMMENDATIONS***

As requested by the Town Board, the 20/20 Committee developed a series of recommendations, which are summarized below and described in more detail in the body of the full report.

**Fiscal Sustainability:** The committee developed eight recommendations related to fiscal sustainability. These are summarized as follows:

- Encourage responsible non-residential growth;
- Develop a comprehensive financial strategy and capital plan
- Consider the costs and benefits of land preservation;
- Maintain sound fiscal controls and establish performance goals related to key economic and fiscal indicators;
- Update the Town's Comprehensive Plan; and,
- Re-evaluate the policy that separates the Town's two primary water systems.

**Economic Development:** The Committee developed the following two recommendations regarding economic development:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive Town-wide economic development strategy; and,
- Actively support the development of the Vista Technology Campus and the Selkirk Yards Industrial District, while also looking to identify locations for a similar future economic development initiative within the Town.

**Modernizing Town Government:** The Committee developed the following five recommendations related to modernizing Town government:

- Establish a non-partisan committee to focus in greater detail on opportunities for modernizing Town government to improve the quality and efficiency of Town programs and services;
- Invest in technology and "green" practices;
- Develop a long-range plan to bring the Town's basic infrastructure to an appropriate level of repair and functionality;
- Provide modern, safe and technologically advanced facilities and buildings; and,
- Understand the changing wants and needs of Town residents while maintaining the highest quality programs and services.

**Cooperation Among Taxing Jurisdictions:** The Committee developed a comprehensive recommendation regarding cooperation among the taxing jurisdictions that provide services to Town residents. While acknowledging past cooperation, the Committee encourages the Town to take a leadership role in furthering opportunities for more efficient and effective service delivery through the following cooperative activities:

- Establish an intergovernmental working group to facilitate a continuous dialogue designed to improve cooperation and integration of financial planning;

- Consider the joint participation of all the taxing jurisdictions in a comprehensive Town-wide economic development program and explore the use of tax sharing agreements when undertaking large-scale economic development projects;
- Establish a community betterment compact among the Town's governmental units;
- Strengthen intergovernmental relations to attract State and Federal financial support; and,
- Explore the potential for consolidation and sharing of services.

### ***CONCLUSION – CITIZEN RESPONSIBILITY***

The Committee recognizes that the Town of Bethlehem is a special place to live. However, it also recognizes the difficult challenges that must be faced to ensure the sustainability of the Town. The 20/20 initiative has shed light on the importance of citizen involvement in Town government's affairs. Engaged and informed Town citizens can be of great value as the Town makes the difficult choices that lie ahead. There is also a clear need to strengthen volunteerism throughout the Town. The members of the 20/20 Advisory Committee have found their participation in this initiative to be extremely informative and valuable. The Committee strongly recommends that other taxing jurisdictions within the Town undertake similar initiatives to better involve citizens in understanding and responding to the fiscal, organizational and operational challenges facing all forms of local governments. Like the Town, these taxing jurisdictions should examine opportunities to work with other taxing jurisdiction on ways to optimize the efficiencies and effectiveness of their programs and services while working to better manage costs.