

Town of Bethlehem, New York

20/20
ADVISORY COMMITTEE
FINAL REPORT
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
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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.

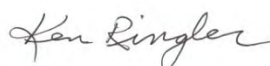
The Committee's mission was to involve key stakeholders in a community-wide conversation about the long-term strategic direction of the Town (as an institution) and to provide broad-based guidance and direction to the Town Board as it faces the many challenges and difficult decisions ahead. We have used 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

PART 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

PART 2: THE 20/20 ADVISORY COMMITTEE

THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS & STAFF

The following Town residents were appointed by the Town Board in January 2008 to serve on the 20/20 Advisory Committee. Former Town Supervisors Terri Egan and Ken Ringler were appointed co-chairs of the committee.

Terri Egan, Co-Chair	Terry Hannigan
Ken Ringler, Co-Chair	Dick Kotlow
Steve Baboulis	Jim Lytle
Keith Bennett	John Piechnik
James Blendell	Ted Putney
Mort Borzykowski	Pam Robbins
John Clarkson	Patty Salkin
Steve Coffey	Brian Stenson
Peter Conway	Suzanne Traylor
Joanne Cunningham	Bob Verstandig, Jr.
Lisa Evans	Bob Ward
Cathy Griffin	Ann Wendth
Susan Hager	Christo Zemerling

Staff support of the Committee was provided by Supervisor John H. Cunningham, former Town Comptroller Judi Kehoe, current Town Comptroller Suzanne Traylor, former Director of Economic Development and Planning (DEDP) George Leveille, DEDP Administrative Aide Debbie Kleinke Kitchen, and Confidential Secretary to the Town Supervisor Kim Ryan.

SUB-COMMITTEES

Three sub-committees were established to assist the full committee in completing its work. The **Communications Sub-Committee** was chaired by John Piechnik and included Steve Baboulis, Supervisor Cunningham, Terry Hannigan and George Leveille. The purpose of the sub-committee was to establish mechanisms to proactively communicate to community stakeholders the importance of the topics being considered by the 20/20 Advisory Committee. The sub-committee recommended ways that community stakeholders could be educated about the issues being considered by 20/20 and worked to create public awareness of the 20/20 initiative. Among other things, the sub-committee helped to produce informational telecasts that were shown on the Town's educational network. The sub-committee also produced presentation materials that could be used for small group and public presentations and also assisted in placing informational articles in the Spotlight Newspaper, the Town's e-Newsletter, and the Bethlehem Report.

The **Community Survey Sub-Committee** was established to conduct a random sample survey of Town residents to obtain input regarding Town services and finances. The Sub-committee was chaired by Pam Robbins and included Terri Egan, Cathy Griffin, Susan Hager, George Leveille, Patty Salkin and Brian Stenson. Pam Robbins volunteered the assistance of her firm, Policy Research Associates, Inc. to help produce the survey and tabulate the results. The Sub-committee met on numerous occasions and the

survey was launched on March 31. Section 5 of this report contains the final report of the Sub-committee.

The **Financial Modeling Sub-Committee** was established to assist staff and its outside consultant, Camoin Associates, in developing financial models for the Committee's consideration. Mort Borzykowski, John Clarkson, Dick Kotlow, Brian Stenson and Supervisor Cunningham served on this sub-committee. The purpose of the financial modeling exercise was two-fold: to look at the impact of alternative growth scenarios on the Town's tax base, and to project the Town's long-term fiscal needs based on current trends. The complete financial analysis is included in Section 4 of this report.

MISSION STATEMENT

Over the course of several months, the Committee worked to refine its mission and action plan and developed 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 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."

WORK PLAN

Based on its mission, the Committee approached this initiative as a strategic planning exercise for the Town as a municipal corporation. This is distinguished from the Comprehensive Plan's strategic planning that related primarily to community character and growth. The Committee was generally charged with assisting the Town in establishing a vision, guiding principles, goals and action plan for the Town government to achieve the community vision for 2020 as articulated in the Comp Plan. The following is an outline of the work plan elements that the Committee utilized in fulfilling its mission:

1. Use of financial models to provide a framework for Committee recommendations based on long-term operating trends and alternative growth scenarios;
2. Participation in departmental presentations to ensure that the Committee had a good overall perspective of both existing and prospective Town programs and services;
3. Conduct a facilitated SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) session among the Committee members to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to Town government;
4. Development of a Vision Statement for the Town government (as an institution rather than a place) in the year 2020;
5. Establishment of principles (key community values) to guide Town decision-making;
6. Survey the community to obtain citizen input on the development of recommendations.

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 for 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

After several months of committee meetings and Town department presentations, the Committee recognized the potential enormity and complexity of its mission and determined that its recommendations should be of a relatively general nature. There was concern among the members that it would be impractical to provide the level of information and operating detail to enable the Committee to make highly detailed recommendations about Town programs, services and infrastructure. The Committee felt that successor committees could be established to focus in more detail on specific opportunities to improve Town government and that the 20/20 Committee was most suitable for establishing general direction and guidance to the Town Board. In this vein, the Committee determined that providing the Town Board with guiding principles would be helpful in supporting Town decision making. Guiding principles are often used in strategic planning exercises to establish consensus on key shared values that can guide decision-making. The Committee agreed on the following guiding principles, which are not presented in priority order:

- a. **Adaptability:** The Town government is a fluid and flexible organization that adapts to changing needs, practices and technologies. It continuously identifies “opportunity areas” for increased efficiency and productivity including both inter- and intra-governmental opportunities for sharing or consolidation of services, and capacity building. It also understands the changing demographics of the community and adjusts programs and services to best meet the evolving needs of the community.
- b. **Sustainability:** The Town utilizes its resources in a sustainable manner. Rooted in a participatory process, the Town practices long-range organizational, capital and fiscal planning and balances the needs of the community with the community’s resources and facilities. The Town operates within a multi-year financial plan to steadily address the capital and operational needs of the community. The Town incorporates energy efficiency, environmental protection, and fiscal integrity into its decision-making and operational processes and holds those who provide goods and services to the Town to the same standard.

- c. **Cooperation among Taxing Jurisdictions:** A variety of governmental organizations provides services within the Town of Bethlehem. These include, among others, the State of New York, the County of Albany, the Town (including its water and sewer districts), three school and library districts, five fire districts, and three ambulance districts. The Town provides leadership in fostering a cooperative dialogue with the other taxing jurisdictions in evaluating the costs and benefits of services provided, and in exploring new and improved methods for providing the most efficient and cost effective means to deliver public services.
- d. **Communications & Citizen Involvement:** The Town utilizes a variety of methods to communicate with its residents and businesses. It also promotes citizen involvement and an open approach to Town operations through the use of advisory committees, which provide input and recommendations that support the Town's decision-making process. The Town reaches out to its residents through a variety of techniques including "town hall style" meetings, electronic newsletters and reports, community surveys, public access television, and a well-designed and managed web site, which allows residents to interact remotely with the Town government.
- e. **Fiscal Responsibility:** The Town operates in a fiscally responsible manner that incorporates long-term financial planning into its budgetary process, and maintains adequate budgetary reserves to withstand economic stress. The Town continues to balance community needs against financial resources. Decisions regarding competing priorities and limited financial resources are made with the long-term needs of the community in mind. The Town's budget process produces a balanced and sustainable financial plan, in which expenditures and revenues are reasonably estimated and programs operate efficiently. The Town strives to keep taxes in line with economic conditions in order to ensure the fiscal health of the community while guarding against unsustainable tax growth.
- f. **Diversity:** The Town government embraces and balances the diverse interests, viewpoints and characteristics of Town residents and landowners as an essential quality of the community.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETINGS & TOPICS

The committee met monthly since its establishment in January 2008. The following is a summary of the regular committee meetings and the meeting topics that were covered. The actual meeting agendas and records are included in the Appendix to this report. All committee meetings were held at the Elsmere Fire Station on West Poplar Drive.

Day/Date	Meeting Topics
Friday, 2/15/08	▪ Bethlehem Industrial Development Agency (BIDA) Strategy Overview ▪ Financial Overview
Friday, 3/14/08	▪ Comprehensive Plan Overview ▪ Financial Modeling
Friday, 4/11/08	▪ Part 1 Presentation of major programs and services by Police Department and Town Justice ▪ Overview of Facilities Needs Analysis
Friday, 5/9/08	▪ Infrastructure overview by Department of Public Works, Engineering and Highway personnel

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Day/Date	Meeting Topics
Friday, 6/13/08	- Group discussion: Public Safety; Highway, Engineering and Public Works; Economic Development 2008 financial update
Friday, 7/11/08	- Financial modeling overview; Camoin Associates - Group discussion continued: Highway, Engineering and Public Works
Friday, 8/22/08	- Group discussion: Detailed action plan - Overview of economic development opportunities and constraints
Friday, 9/19/08	2008 Financial update - Part 2 Presentation of major programs and services: Senior Services, Parks and Recreation
Friday, 10/17/08	- Sub-committee reports - Presentation on projected Town finances
Friday, 11/21/08	- Sub-committee reports - Presentation, Town Tax Base Analysis; Camoin Associates
Friday, 12/19/08	- Sub-committee reports - Taxpayer worksheet exercise - Facilitated Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Threats (SWOT) session
Friday, 1/23/09	- Sub-committee reports - Discussion of SWOT, vision statement, guiding principles and key survey questions
Friday, 2/13/09	- Sub-committee reports - Discussion of SWOT, vision statement, guiding principles and key survey questions
Friday, 2/27/09	- Sub-committee reports - Finalize SWOT results and vision statement - Review guiding principles - Discuss key survey questions
Friday, 3/20/09	- Sub-committee reports - Discuss preliminary report and recommendations
Friday, 4/24/09	- Sub-committee reports - Discussion of preliminary community survey results - Final report update

Day/Date	Meeting Topics
Wednesday, 5/13/09	Public meeting and presentation to Town Board of Preliminary Report
Friday, 5/29/09	- Final sub-committee reports - Discussion of Final Report
Friday, 6/12/09	Approve Final Report for delivery to Town Board

PART 3: FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

As a framework for understanding the Town's current and projected fiscal condition, Town staff presented data regarding the sources and uses of Town revenues as well as a picture of the overall real property tax structure for Town of Bethlehem residents. The information that perhaps had the most impact on the Committee's understanding of the Town's situation is depicted in the pie chart in Appendix 2 that shows how a typical Town resident's tax dollar is divided among the Town's various taxing jurisdictions. Many Committee members were surprised to learn that only \$.12 (twelve cents) of every property tax dollar paid by Town residents is dedicated to direct Town services including Public Safety, Public Works (water and sewer), Highway, Parks & Recreation and others. The significance of this fact is that expansion of the Town's tax base through economic development only yields modest new tax revenue opportunities for the Town's programs, services, facilities and infrastructure needs.

With this backdrop, the Town retained an independent consulting firm, Camoin Associates, to analyze the existing and projected tax base of the Town and determine the fiscal impact of alternative development scenarios. The following is the verbatim Executive Summary of the report that was presented to the Committee.

KEY FINDINGS OF TAX BASE ANALYSIS

Camoin Associates was retained by the Town of Bethlehem to analyze the existing and projected tax base of the Town and determine the fiscal impact of three development scenarios. These projections and development scenarios will be useful in planning for the future of the Town and to help stakeholders and residents understand the impact that land-use decisions have on the revenue and expenditures of the Town.

As we conducted our study, however, a number of important initial findings caused us to look into additional related trends. Specifically, we quickly identified a noticeable divergence of expenditure and revenue trends for all of the Town's major funds. Our interviews with Town staff led us to further understand that a number of fiscal issues will likely exaggerate this trend, including the Town's need to reinvest in infrastructure and certain unavoidable future expenses such as pension and health care commitments to current, past and future employees. Where possible, we tried to incorporate these issues in our calculations and findings to provide a comprehensive picture of the implications of changes to the Town's tax base. The main findings of the report are below:

- The Town of Bethlehem's tax base is primarily residential, with over 80% of the Town's taxable value in residential property. When considering the Town's General, Highway, Water and Sewer

funds and the school district, the average household in the Town requires \$1,860 more in services than it pays in taxes.

- Non-residential property, conversely, makes up about 20% of the taxable value of Town property but provides a significant subsidy to the Town residents by generating revenues while demanding relatively little in services.
- The current rate of growth in Town expenses far exceeds the rate of revenue growth. If we extrapolate the current expenditure and revenue trends (annual projected increase of 5.3% and 3.9% respectively) out to 2020, we estimate that the Town would be facing a \$12 million deficit. So that we could provide meaningful results in our study, we had to assume that the Town would be taking a number of significant actions to address this anticipated shortfall. Even with those assumptions, our analysis shows that the Town will have to raise its property tax rate significantly to meet expenditure demands.
- One way to mitigate the upward pressure on the tax rate is to concentrate on the development of new commercial and industrial property, thus expanding the tax base upon which the property tax burden is levied. Our analysis shows that an aggressive approach to targeting growth of commercial and industrial space will provide substantial new property tax revenues while costing relatively little in additional community services. This benefit of new tax base accrues predominately to the school district, which will receive a large bump up in its tax base with no change to its primary cost driver, school enrollment. The Town will also experience a positive net benefit, but to a much lesser extent.
- This commercial and industrial growth will only be possible if the Town takes certain positive actions and makes infrastructure improvements and reinvestments. We suggest that the Town and its primary school districts begin discussions on using some of the anticipated tax revenue increase from development to pay for the investments required to make this possible. There are a number of ways that communities have been able to do this, including a tax revenue sharing program between the School Districts and the Town of additional revenues made possible by the new development.
- With an allocation of 20% of the new revenue to pay for these types of necessary community investments/reinvestments, the upward pressure on the Town's property tax rate would be further lessened. The revenue sharing program would help ease the burden of the residents and business owners while allowing the Town to maintain and upgrade its services.
- Assuming that the Town is successful at realizing new commercial and industrial tax base, and that the Town can achieve agreement on a revenue sharing agreement with the School Districts, the Town will still have to make a concerted effort to cut costs to mitigate the anticipated increase in the tax rate. We suggest that the Town begin a frank discussion with its residents about the tradeoffs between keeping or decreasing current service levels and the tax levy implications.

PART 4: REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY SURVEY SUB-COMMITTEE

SURVEY OVERVIEW

The 20/20 Committee decided to survey Bethlehem voters about their priorities and reactions to many of the pressing issues facing the Town to help ground the recommendations that resulted from discussions of these issues during the 20/20 meetings. This was not intended as an exhaustive community survey but as a small random survey of voters to gauge their reaction to important upcoming Town decisions.

A Survey Sub-Committee led by Pamela Clark Robbins was assembled and met several times to develop the framework and questions for the survey. This group also participated in the review of results and presentation to the Town Board on May 13, 2009. Sub-Committee members included: Terri Egan, Susan Hager, Cathy Griffin, George Leveille, Patty Salkin and Brian Stenson. Other persons with input on the survey questions included John Clarkson, Lisa Evans and Supervisor Cunningham, with review and comments from the entire Committee at two meetings.

The survey was modeled on questions from an earlier Bethlehem survey conducted in 2004 and questions from similar surveys conducted in other communities. A copy of the survey is included in the Appendix. The survey was organized into four sections: overall impressions of Bethlehem, Town services and performance, opinions on important issues facing the Town, and respondent profile.

The survey sample was drawn from a computerized list of all Town voters. A random sample of 1,500 Town residents (sample limited by cost primarily) who had voted in a recent local election (2003, 2005 or 2007) was abstracted by Policy Research Associates, Inc. These surveys were mailed on March 31, 2009 by the Town of Bethlehem with return postage included as a foldable flyer. None were returned as undeliverable. No follow-up mailings were done to boost the return rate which was targeted at 20% but the survey was accompanied by a letter from the Supervisor. Surveys were returned to the Town and then delivered to Policy Research Associates, Inc. of Delmar where data entry and analysis were performed and the results compiled. The draft results were made available to the 20/20 Committee and the Survey Sub-committee. The survey results were submitted to the Committee on May 29, 2009.

SURVEY RESPONSE

As of May 1, 2009, 331 survey forms were received. This resulted in a **response rate of 22%** which was very close to that expected and is consistent with other general mail surveys. Unfortunately, the limited amount of data on the survey sample precludes an analysis of any bias that may be present in the responses, but the characteristics of respondents indicate that there might be a slight overrepresentation of residents who are older and have lived in the Town for many years. It is not clear whether those residents are more likely to be in the local voter database or were more likely to return the survey. A comparison with Census data which is beyond the scope of this report may provide some insights. But in general, the Committee believes that with the number of returned surveys the results reported here would be unlikely to change with a higher response rate since the results controlling for age were not significantly different from the results presented here. The following is a summary of the survey results.

1. RESPONDENT PROFILE

Who were the 331 respondents?

Mostly older (74% over 50 years old; 38% retired),

Slightly more than half female (54%),

Majority living in Delmar or Elsmere (57%),

92% own home; average household size is 2,

Lived in Bethlehem for an average of 26 years, only 25% had lived here 13 years or less.

2. OVERALL IMPRESSIONS OF BETHLEHEM

Taking all things into consideration, how do you rate the overall quality of life in the Town of Bethlehem compared to other areas in the Capital Region? Has that changed in the past 5 years?

78% Better in Bethlehem than in other places, 20% about the same

Two-thirds (66%) felt this was the same as five years ago, 17% better, 17% worse

What do you like most and what do you like least?

The top three answers to what respondents liked: Services (49% of respondents) were listed as number one with the subcategories of police/safety and highway at the top of the list; General positive feelings/small town feel/neighborhoods (42%); Location (36%). The top three answers to what they liked least: Taxes (38% of respondents); Services (24%) sidewalks and police/safety were the top two subcategories; Development (17%) primarily business development/big box stores

3. TOWN SERVICES AND PERFORMANCE

The following section lists specific services provided by the Town of Bethlehem. Please rate how important it is that the Town provides each of these services.

Reported importance ranked from high to low	Average Score 1: Low – 5: High	Low (1 or 2)	Medium (3)	High (4 or 5)
	Mean	%	%	%
Providing prompt and courteous 911 operations – Importance	4.48	2.7%	9.5%	87.8%
Police response to medical emergency call – Importance	4.44	4.3%	8.7%	87.0%
Reliable sewer system – Importance	4.39	1.0%	14.7%	84.3%
Water taste and quality – Importance	4.33	4.0%	13.6%	82.5%
Police response to traffic incidents and other citizen calls – Importance	4.32	3.0%	13.3%	83.7%
Keeping neighborhood streets free of snow and ice – Importance	4.30	3.4%	12.8%	83.8%
Reliable and consistent water pressure – Importance	4.29	1.6%	14.8%	83.6%
Maintaining existing streets and sidewalks – Importance	3.99	5.8%	21.7%	72.5%
Brush and leaves curbside collection – Importance	3.97	7.6%	18.0%	74.4%
Enforcing traffic laws (Speeding, D.U.I., etc.) – Importance	3.93	10.3%	18.7%	71.0%

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Policing of the community through patrols – Importance	3.93	10.5%	18.3%	71.2%
Parks and Recreational Services – Importance	3.91	7.7%	23.4%	68.9%
Senior services – Importance	3.90	7.8%	23.6%	68.6%
Maintaining public lands, buildings and facilities – Importance	3.89	3.6%	29.5%	66.9%
Transfer station/ Recycling Program – Importance	3.89	6.6%	21.3%	72.1%
Supporting business and economic development – Importance	3.78	9.1%	25.8%	65.2%
Making improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists – Importance	3.62	15.4%	28.5%	56.1%
Youth services/ Youth employment – Importance	3.62	12.5%	29.8%	57.7%
Building & code enforcement services – Importance	3.60	11.0%	36.2%	52.8%
Improving neighborhood streets and intersections – Importance	3.59	14.6%	30.2%	55.2%
Beautifying the community with landscaping – Importance	3.56	12.2%	31.7%	56.1%
Water billing and payment services – Importance	3.44	12.8%	44.3%	42.9%
Providing information via quarterly 'Bethlehem Report' – Importance	3.27	19.6%	38.8%	41.7%
Providing information to citizens via website – Importance	3.16	23.9%	35.7%	40.4%
Providing information via monthly E-Mail newsletter – Importance	2.78	35.7%	36.9%	27.3%
Broadcasting Town meetings on cable channel 18 – Importance	2.45	51.6%	28.3%	20.2%

Then rate how satisfied you are with how well the Town is providing that service: exceeds expectations, meets expectations or below expectations.

Reported satisfaction ranked from high to low	Average Score 1: Below – 3: Exceeds			
	Mean	Below %	Meets %	Exceeds %
Brush and leaves curbside collection – Expectations	2.43	2.3%	52.3%	45.4%
Keeping neighborhood streets free of snow and ice – Expectations	2.30	4.5%	60.9%	34.6%
Police response to medical emergency call – Expectations	2.29	2.6%	65.7%	31.7%
Parks and Recreational Services – Expectations	2.29	2.8%	64.9%	32.3%
Senior services – Expectations	2.28	3.3%	65.4%	31.3%
Providing prompt and courteous 911 operations – Expectations	2.26	2.6%	68.7%	28.7%
Police response to traffic incidents and other citizen calls – Expectations	2.21	3.6%	72.3%	24.1%
Reliable and consistent water pressure – Expectations	2.15	3.8%	77.2%	19.0%
Providing information via quarterly 'Bethlehem Report' – Expectations	2.15	2.4%	80.3%	17.2%
Reliable sewer system – Expectations	2.13	4.2%	78.4%	17.4%
Beautifying the community with landscaping – Expectations	2.12	6.2%	75.8%	18.0%
Youth services/ Youth employment – Expectations	2.12	6.1%	75.8%	18.0%
Transfer station/ Recycling Program – Expectations	2.11	6.5%	76.0%	17.5%
Enforcing traffic laws (Speeding, D.U.I., etc.) – Expectations	2.10	8.5%	73.0%	18.4%
Maintaining public lands, buildings and facilities – Expectations	2.09	3.5%	83.6%	12.9%
Maintaining existing streets and sidewalks – Expectations	2.07	11.2%	70.6%	18.2%
Providing information to citizens via website – Expectations	2.07	6.0%	81.1%	12.9%
Broadcasting Town meetings on cable channel 18 – Expectations	2.06	7.4%	79.5%	13.0%
Providing information via monthly E-Mail newsletter – Expectations	2.05	8.7%	77.3%	14.0%
Improving neighborhood streets and intersections – Expectations	2.04	9.8%	76.4%	13.8%
Water billing and payment services – Expectations	2.04	4.8%	86.7%	8.5%
Policing of the community through patrols – Expectations	2.01	12.8%	73.7%	13.5%
Building & code enforcement services – Expectations	2.00	7.4%	84.8%	7.8%

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Water taste and quality – Expectations	1.99	16.7%	67.6%	15.7%
Supporting business and economic development – Expectations	1.92	15.3%	77.6%	7.1%
Making improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists – Expectations	1.78	30.1%	61.6%	8.2%

In summary- most services were ranked as important by the majority of residents with the exception being some communications services. The most important services were emergency services and water and sewer. Those emergency services generally met or exceeded expectations but Town services related to making improvements for pedestrians and supporting business development were less likely to do so although the ratings were still very high.

Town program(s) or service(s), if any, that could be eliminated?

77% did not name one service that could be eliminated

23% identified at least one service that could be eliminated (only 12 had more than 1)

Top three listed: Roads/plowing- specifically sidewalk plowing (11%), Police (11%), Bethlehem Reports and other communication (9%)

What additional service(s), if any, do you believe the Town should provide?

18% named at least one additional service (only 5 named more than 1)

Top three listed: Garbage pickup (14%), Other services (13%), Recycling/going green (7%), Bike path and sidewalks came next.

Which statement is closest to your view regarding the current level of Town programs and services knowing that the level of programs and services is directly related to the need for property taxes?

The majority- 72%- want to keep programs and services at current levels

23% want to decrease programs and services

Very few- 5%- want to increase programs and services

The 20/20 Committee believes that the Town will be faced with challenges on how it focuses its resources in the coming years. For each Town service listed below, please indicate where you believe services should be increased, decreased, or maintained.

The majority of respondents felt that services should be maintained (range=61-82%)

Slightly likely to increase- Public works, Highways

Slightly likely to decrease- Facilities, Public safety, Parks/Rec/Youth, Mixed- Planning and Economic Development

Town Service	% Increase	% Maintain	% Decrease
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Highways (sidewalks, roads, snow/ice removal)	10.4%	81.6%	7.9%
Public Works (water, sewer and storm water systems)	16.2%	81.2%	2.6%
Public Safety (Police and Town Court)	4.5%	75.5%	20.1%
Parks & Recreation, Youth Services	6.5%	73.3%	20.2%
Planning & Economic Development	16.6%	60.7%	22.7%
Senior Services	8.0%	79.6%	12.5%
Facilities (Town Hall & Annex)	2.0%	68.6%	29.4%

4. OPINION ON IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING THE TOWN

If the Town were to enhance an existing service or institute new programs or services that were needed within the community, how do you believe these programs and services should be funded? With 1 being the funding method you would support the most and 6 being the funding method you would support the least please rank the following list from 1-6.

Funding methods ranked from most supported (1) to least supported (6)	Average rating	% With this option as the #1 choice	% With this option as the #6 choice
Seek new outside revenue sources to supplement Town funding	1.95	59%	4%
Fund through fees for service and/or user fees	2.59	28%	4%
Use existing funds but decrease funding for other programs and services	3.34	17%	8%
Do not enhance existing or add new programs and services	3.43	28%	20%
Charge additional fees to access Town facilities and parks	3.54	12%	12%
Increase property tax levy	5.22	4%	69%

Most residents believe the Town should seek new outside revenue sources if any additional service or programs were needed in the community and very few would support any tax levy increase to fund these services.

5. INVESTMENT ALTERNATIVES FACING TOWN GOVERNMENT

The 20/20 committee has identified several major investments, listed below, that the Town may need to make in the near future despite the fact that it has limited resources to invest. With 1 being most desirable and 4 being least desirable, please rank the following list of

investment alternatives that you believe the Town should consider and please identify any other alternatives that you believe should be considered:

Investment Alternatives ranked from most desirable (1) to least desirable (4)	Average rating	% With this option as the #1 choice
Invest in aging Town infrastructure including water and wastewater treatment plants and pipes	1.50	64%
Invest in farmland and open space conservation	2.33	26%
Upgrade outdated or inadequate public facilities such as Town Hall and Elm Avenue Park	2.88	6%

An overwhelming number of respondents felt that the of the choices given the Town should invest in aging Town infrastructure including water and wastewater treatment plants and pipes and very few felt that upgrade of public facilities and buildings such as Town Hall and the Elm Avenue Park should be a priority.

*Note: The Other write-in option was only used by only 52 respondents and included Sidewalk/Pedestrian, Business Development and Bike Path (each written in by 15%) with an average rating of 2.65 and 19% listing this as their #1 choice.

6. PAYING FOR NEEDED PUBLIC IMPROVEMENTS

The Town has historically used current operating revenues from sales tax, mortgage recording tax and property taxes as its primary funding source for both ongoing operations and also capital expenditures. Unfortunately, this has resulted in deferred maintenance of certain Town infrastructure and facilities and the growing need for major capital expenditures. By way of example, over the next ten years, the Town's primary water and waste water treatment plants both need major upgrades estimated to cost more than \$30 million. The Town will need to borrow to pay for these improvements and will need to consider financial alternatives, like those listed below, to enable it to make the debt service payments on the bonds.

With 1 being most desirable and 6 being least desirable, please rank the following list of financial alternatives that you believe the Town should consider to pay for needed public improvements and please identify any other alternatives that you believe should be considered:

Financial alternatives to pay for improvements ranked from most desirable (1) to least desirable (6)	Average rating	% With this option as the #1 choice	% With this option as the #6 choice
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Distinguish between essential and non-essential Town services and charge reasonable user fees for non-essential services using the proceeds to pay for the needed improvements	2.37	30%	3%
Encourage new non-residential development in appropriately planned and zoned locations and utilize new tax revenues to pay for the needed improvements	2.44	43%	6%
Evaluate programs and services and reduce or eliminate existing expenditures and re-allocate the funds to pay for the needed improvements	2.49	29%	3%
Defer maintenance on Town infrastructure and buildings and only pay for the needed improvements to the extent that they can be supported by existing budget and tax levels	3.54	17%	10%
Increase property taxes to the level necessary to pay the debt service on the bonds	4.74	4%	41%

Respondents thought that distinguishing between essential and non-essential services and charging user fees for non-essential services along with encouraging appropriately planned non-residential development were more desirable than deferring needed maintenance or increasing property tax levy to pay for needed public improvements.

*Note: The Other write-in responses by 60 respondents were varied and included taxes, consolidation, outside funding to name a few with an average ranking of 2.95 but they presented a combination of desirable and undesirable options making interpretation of the ranking difficult.

Which of the following statements best represents your view on how the Town should approach consolidation or the sharing of municipal services?

The overwhelming majority support consolidation but they would only be willing to give up Town control of services where there is demonstrated saving or improvements.

	% Agree	% Disagree	% No Opinion
In general, Town government should continuously be evaluating opportunities for improved services and reduced operating costs through consolidation of programs and services both within Town government and with other governmental units	90.9%	7.1%	1.9%
I would be willing to give up Town control of services only where there are demonstrated and significant cost savings or improved services	79.3%	17.4%	3.3%

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I would support municipal consolidation or shared services with other municipalities where residents of the other municipality benefit, even if there was no clear benefit to Bethlehem residents	32.9%	53.6%	13.5%
I prefer that all services currently provided by the Town government remain under Town control	30.7%	53.8%	15.5%

Almost all respondents (91%) believe that Town government should continuously be evaluating opportunities for improved services and reduced costs through consolidation and there was no overwhelming support (31%) for keeping all Town services under Town control.

7. OTHER THOUGHTS, COMMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS TO SHARE WITH THE BETHLEHEM 20/20 ADVISORY COMMITTEE?

There were many comments here from 215 people (65% of respondents). These comments were varied and difficult to summarize but many related to taxes and schools and additional comments about consolidation. These comments and suggestions will be passed on to the Town supervisor in detail.

PART 5: 20/20 RECOMMENDATIONS

After several months of presentations by Town departments, the complexity of the Committee's task became clear to the members and the Committee deliberated about the depth and breadth of the recommendations it would be reasonably poised to make. While there was some desire to produce very detailed and explicit recommendations, the Committee ultimately resolved that it should focus on fairly general recommendations that could lead to subsequent, more detailed analysis of challenges and opportunities by successor stakeholder groups. Through the use of guiding principles (key community values to be considered in decision making) and its community survey, the Committee has attempted to provide insight on the opinions and preferences of Town residents and taxpayers on the pressing issues facing the Town. While general in nature, the recommendations that follow provide direction to the Town Board on four key issues: **Fiscal Sustainability**, **Economic Development**, **Modernizing Town Government**, and **Cooperation among Taxing Jurisdictions**. In addition, in the Conclusion section of the Report, the Committee addresses the critical importance of **Citizen Responsibility**. With regard to implementation of the recommendations, the Committee has noted its suggested implementation timeframe in *italics* at the end of each recommendation. Finally, the Committee notes that many of the specific recommendations listed below relate to activities that may already be underway in the Town. In such cases, the Committee recommends that these activities be continued and in certain instances, accelerated.

FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY

Recent economic conditions underscore the challenges local governments face with regard to fiscal sustainability. Approximately 25% of the Town's annual revenues come from the distribution of sales tax collected in Albany County. The current economic downturn could result in a significant negative impact on Town finances. On the other hand, the Town's costs of operation continue to grow while at the same time facilities and infrastructure are aging and in need of investment. Currently, the Town is overly dependent on residential property taxpayers for revenue, which account for more than 75% of the overall tax base. The Town's industrial base is aging, limited in diversity, and poses other potential

competitive risks. The following are the 20/20 Committee's recommendations related to Fiscal Sustainability:

- a) Encourage responsible forms of development (growth) of the community that helps diversify the Town's tax base; **(Implementation: Ongoing)**
- b) Consider the costs and benefits of open space and farmland preservation and avoided public service costs as an alternative means of improving the fiscal sustainability of the Town; **(Implementation: Ongoing)**
- c) Maintain sound controls to ensure the fiscal integrity and viability of the Town; **(Implementation: Ongoing)**
- d) Establish and periodically report on measurable performance goals related to the Town's tax base, economic development, the ratio of residents to jobs located within the Town, and investment in existing and new infrastructure, programs and services; **(Implementation: initial goals, 2009-2010, review and reporting, Ongoing)**
- e) Develop a financial strategy and capital plan that includes, among other things, the following:
 - Development of a needs assessment and capital plan to prioritize and quantify the infrastructure, facility, service and programmatic needs of the Town;
 - Distinction between essential and non-essential Town services and charge reasonable user fees for non-essential services using the proceeds to pay for needed improvements;
 - Methods to leverage Town resources by attracting private and other governmental investment to implement Town capital priorities;
 - An assessment of debt affordability and a balanced plan to fund capital investments; and
 - The use of incentive zoning to encourage developers to provide specified public benefits in exchange for zoning and land use incentives. **(Implementation: 2011)**
- f) In planning for long-term water service, evaluate the current policy that separates our two independent water systems in the Town and determine the financial and operational impact to residents; **(Implementation: 2009-2010)**
- g) Update and communicate the Town's Comprehensive Plan as the authoritative policy guide that shapes the responsible future growth of the Town; **(Implementation: 2011)**
- h) In making choices regarding investment of limited infrastructure improvement funds, consider fiscal, economic and community impacts and benefits as well as the ability of a project to leverage Town resources; **(Implementation: Ongoing)**

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic development is a fundamental element of a sustainable community. Commercial and industrial properties provide employment opportunities for Town residents, business opportunities for the Town's small businesses, and financial support to the Town's taxing jurisdictions. Businesses help to reduce the financial burden on the Town's residential taxpayers. Retention of existing businesses is especially critical to the fiscal stability of the Town's school districts which receive between 65-70% of the real property taxes paid by commercial and industrial properties in the Town. Community planning efforts have identified areas in the Town that are most suitable for new economic development and have also emphasized the importance of the Town's traditional industrial zones. In addition to a strong business retention program, the Town must also be equipped to attract new businesses and commercial investment. As the Capital Region continues to market itself as a technology center, opportunities will exist for modern, clean industry to locate in the Town. To compete effectively for new business development, the Town will need to be proactive in marketing the community as a modern business location, it will need to offer competitive incentives, and it will need to collaborate with private landowners and state and local economic development organizations. The following are the 20/20 Committee's recommendations related to economic development:

- a) Develop and implement a Town-wide economic development strategy that, among other things:
 - Improves the Town's competitiveness for responsible non-residential development;
 - Leverages development projects to assist in accomplishing other community goals/priorities like farmland, natural resource and open space protection and infrastructure investment;
 - Supports farming and agricultural business development;
 - Establishes funding mechanisms to support economic development initiatives;
 - Promotes the Town as a desirable live/work community;
 - Continues to implement an aggressive business retention program to maintain economic stability as the Town works to diversify and grow its commercial and industrial base;
 - Reinforces the Town's hamlet strategy as a means of strengthening the continuum of housing and improving the retention of residents; and,
 - Continues a proactive approach to providing diverse housing choices throughout the Town. ***(Implementation: 2009-2010, Ongoing)***
- b) Actively support development of the Vista Technology Campus and the Selkirk Yards Industrial District and identify and cultivate a future transformational economic development location in the Town. ***(Implementation: Ongoing)***

MODERNIZING TOWN GOVERNMENT

The desire to keep operating expenses and Town property taxes under control is a great challenge when measured against the need to modernize and adapt the Town government to the changing demographics and needs of the community. Modernizing and reorganizing Town government will not alone ensure a sustainable future. However, the Committee believes strongly that opportunities do exist to improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of Town government through organizational improvements. In this vein, the Committee makes the following recommendations with regard to modernizing Town government:

- a) Establish a non-partisan committee to evaluate opportunities for modernizing Town government to be more appropriately organized for the changing needs of the community. Among other things, the committee could explore consolidation of Town Departments including the Department of Public Works and the Highway Department, as a means of streamlining Town government and creating a more fluid and flexible infrastructure management and maintenance organization. It could also examine the potential for providing services jointly with other taxing jurisdictions wholly or partially within the Town's borders. It could also consider the benefits of changing some of the Town's elected offices to professional appointments. As part of this analysis, the Town should identify and consider comparable communities as a means of benchmarking opportunities and progress.
(Implementation: 2010)
- b) Consistent with the Town's commitment to become a "Climate Smart Community", continue to invest in technology and green practices; **(Implementation: Ongoing)**
- c) Provide modern, safe and technologically advanced facilities and buildings that are critical to the delivery of high quality programs and services, as well as ensuring the safety of the employees and citizens who use them; **(Implementation: Ongoing)**
- d) Develop a long-term plan to bring the Town's basic infrastructure (water and wastewater treatment plants, sewer pump stations, buildings etc.) to an appropriate level of functionality; **(Implementation: 2010)**
- e) Maintain the Town's commitment to the highest quality programs and services by:
 - Conducting periodic needs assessments that identify gaps between services and needs, where appropriate in conjunction with other taxing jurisdictions;
(Implementation: Ongoing)
 - Developing operational goals and performance measures, as well as periodic reporting on the progress and impact of programs and services on the Town's residents; **(Implementation: Ongoing)**
 - Conducting a periodic satisfaction survey of Town residents as well as surveys of specific user groups of Town services. **(Implementation: 2011 and Ongoing)**

COOPERATION AMONG TAXING JURISDICTIONS

A variety of taxing jurisdictions provide services to Town residents. While there has been a history of cooperative behavior among many of these jurisdictions, it is imperative that additional efforts are

made to exhaust reasonable opportunities to promote more efficient public services to Town residents. There is a growing need to integrate planning among the many taxing jurisdictions and to better understand the perspective of the taxpayer who supports all the jurisdictions providing services within the Town. In this regard, the following recommendations are made:

- a) The Town should take a leadership role in identifying new opportunities for increased cooperation among local government organizations. This should include, among other things, the following:
 - Establishment of an inter-governmental working group among the jurisdictions that provide services to Town residents to develop shared community values and explore the potential for integration of financial planning. This can assist in best managing limited resources and mitigating “competition” for tax dollars ; **(Implementation: 2009-2010)**
 - One of the first items the inter-governmental working group should consider is the joint participation of all the Town’s taxing jurisdictions in a town-wide economic development program. Economic development is critical to the fiscal sustainability of all the jurisdictions and they should therefore participate jointly and share the burdens and benefits of economic development. **(Implementation: 2009-2010)**
 - When undertaking large-scale economic development projects, explore the use of tax sharing agreements with other taxing jurisdictions to implement community initiatives that meet mutual needs; **(Implementation: 2010 and Ongoing)**
 - Establishment of a community betterment compact among the Town’s governmental units that recognizes their individual and collective responsibility to provide efficient and effective services to community residents; **(Implementation: 2010)**
 - Promote and play a leadership role in regional conversations that consider how services, projects and economic growth will be best managed for the larger community by avoiding duplication, leveraging more non-tax dollars, and investing intelligently in water, sewer and transportation improvements; **(Implementation: Ongoing)**
 - Enhancing cross jurisdictional interaction/cooperation and considering opportunities for inter-municipal sharing or consolidation of services; **(Implementation: Ongoing)**
 - Continuing to explore the potential for efficiencies and service improvements through consolidation or sharing of services including the following current initiatives:
 - I. Assessment and tax collection operations;
 - II. Emergency dispatch services;
 - III. Specialized police services (including training and special equipment). **(Implementation: 2009-2010)**

- Strengthen intergovernmental relations efforts to improve opportunities for leveraging Town investment with Federal and State resources; (**Implementation: Ongoing**)

CONCLUSION - CITIZEN RESPONSIBILITY

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 recreational assets of the Capital Region. It also is 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. It is very important that the Town's residents remain involved in community matters and work with elected officials to find common ground in addressing the challenges of sustainability. An informed and engaged citizenry will help to ensure that the viewpoints of all Town residents are heard and considered. Volunteerism and participation in community forums, advisory committees and community surveys will help to maintain an interactive relationship between Town government and Town citizens.

Because of its large size (50± square miles) and the difference in development intensity between the northern and southern portions of the Town, it is extremely important that efforts be made to improve the overall sense of a "Town" community among the residents of the Town's many hamlets. Cultivation of a stronger Town-wide identity can help to break down barriers that at times divide community members. The use of planning initiatives like the 20/20 Committee can effectively engage the broader community in an ongoing discussion of needs and priorities and cultivate citizen participation and leadership. It also provides opportunities for the continuing education of Town residents related to the operational and investment challenges facing the Town. The Town is fortunate to have many volunteers who contribute their time and effort to improving the Town whether it is manifested in fire and emergency services, senior services, parks and recreation, or voluntary committees that are established from time to time. While not all Town residents can be expected to become more involved in their Town government, cultivating volunteerism throughout the community is a responsibility of our citizens.

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 like 20/20 to better involve citizens in understanding and responding to the fiscal, organizational and operational challenges being faced by all forms of local governments. All taxing jurisdictions should examine ways to optimize the efficiency and effectiveness of the programs and services they provide so they can maintain or improve programs and services while achieving cost efficiencies.

APPENDIX I: “SWOT” RESULTS

At its December 2008 meeting, the 20/20 Committee conducted a facilitated “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats” (SWOT) session to establish a framework for its guiding principles and recommendations related to Town government. The following is a summary of the results of the SWOT session.

1. Strengths:

- Adoption and implementation of a town-wide comprehensive plan
- Strong economic and educational demographics
- High level of participation in volunteer services
- High quality schools
- High quality Town services and personnel
- Responsiveness and accessibility of the Town government
- Strong Real Estate market that demonstrates sustained Real Estate values

2. Weaknesses:

- Maturing demographics of residents
- Municipal and School budgets are disproportionally dependent on the residential tax base
- Competitiveness to grow non-commercial tax base
- Lack of community awareness of the key issues and policy matters affecting the Town
- Diverse opinions hinder governments ability to form consensus on priorities
- Homogeny of demographics
- Aging infrastructure and Town facilities
- Limited financial resources
- Lack of high quality sites for non-residential development
- Insufficient planning relative to capital needs and long range spending

3. Opportunities:

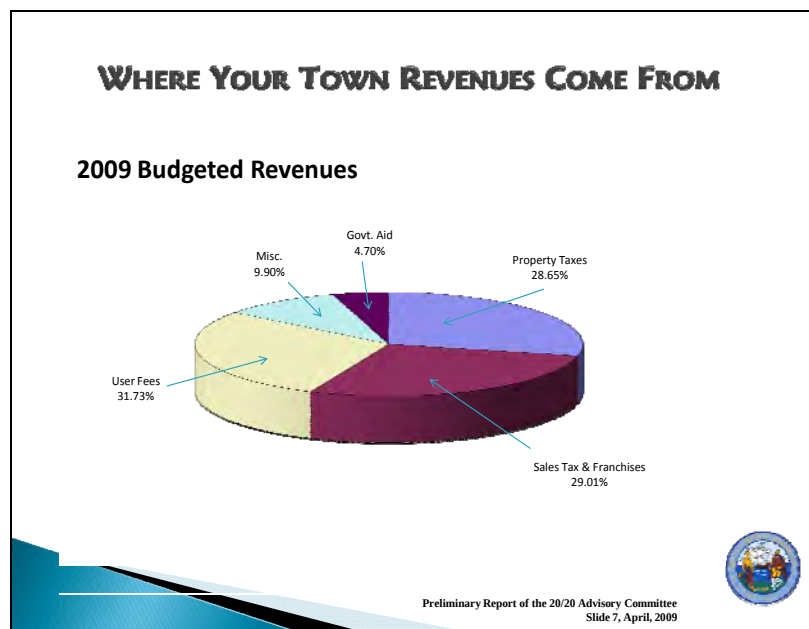
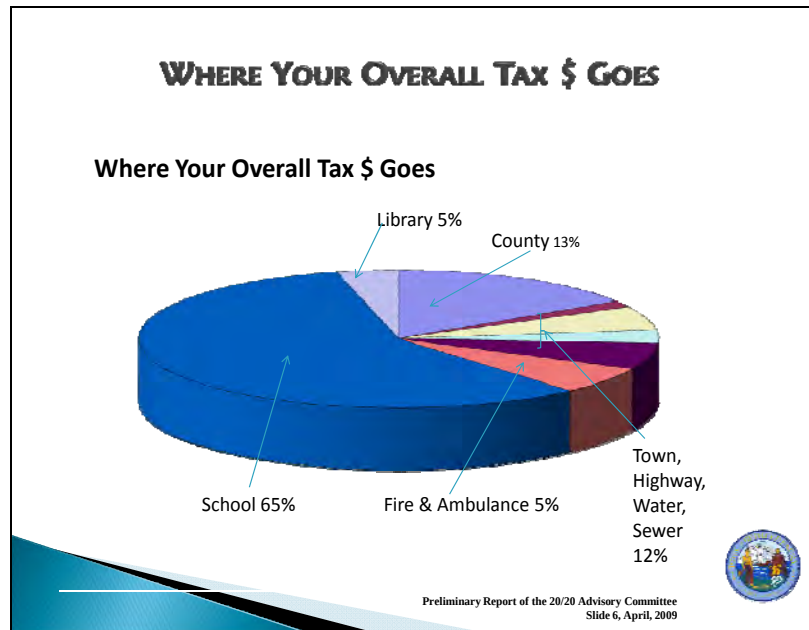
- Shared and/or consolidated services
- Coordination and cooperation with other taxing jurisdictions
- Seek foundation funding
- Increase non-residential tax base
- Current economic conditions provide opportunity for bold/innovative thinking
- Explore new non-property tax revenues including user fees and grants
- Potential for economic stimulus aid
- Structural reforms to Town government

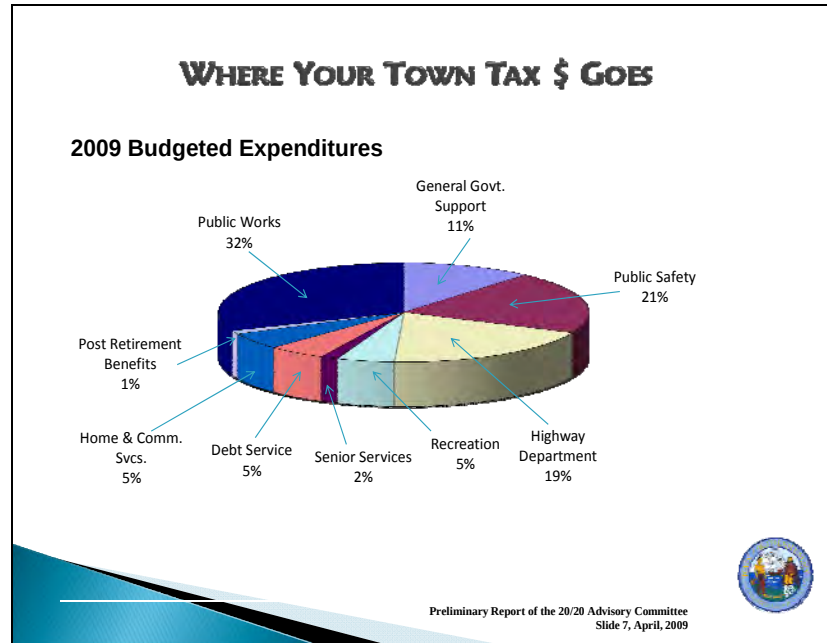
4. Threats:

- Fear of change
- Depleting fund balance
- Unfunded mandates
- Current economic environment
- Over dependence on volunteer emergency services
- Ability to maintain high level of services
- Changing Town demographics, greater dependency upon government

APPENDIX 2: FINANCIAL ANALYSIS PIE CHARTS

The following pie charts were included in the preliminary report of the Committee and provide summary information about Town revenues, expenditures and the distribution of overall tax dollars to taxing jurisdictions located within the Town.





APPENDIX 3: COMMUNITY SURVEY FORM

TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Albany County - New York

OFFICE OF THE SUPERVISOR

445 DELAWARE AVENUE
DELMAR, NEW YORK 12054

(518) 439-4955 x1164

Fax: (518) 439-1699

Email: JCunningham@townofbethlehem.org

John H. Cunningham
Town Supervisor



March 27, 2008

Dear Resident:

You have been selected at random to participate in a survey that will help shape the future of Bethlehem.

We take pride in our Town as a community committed to serving all the needs of our residents. The services you expect from the Town such as water and sanitation, roads and sidewalk maintenance, police and others are expensive to provide. There are numerous needs and a limited amount of funds. The reality is that only 12 cents of your property tax dollar goes to support expenses for highway, water and sewer and Town administration. In fact over the past several years we have been using funds from our reserve to meet our needs. And this does not account for the fact that we will be facing some infrastructure demands in the next few years. These problems are by no means unique. They are happening all over the Capital District and beyond. We continue to proactively look for solutions and plan for the future. In this way we will maintain a viable sustainable community that we can all be proud of.

To this end the 20/20 committee was created. You may have read about this committee in the Spotlight, the Bethlehem Report or on the website. The main purpose of this committee, which is comprised of individuals from many diverse occupations and interest groups in the Town has been meeting over the last year to strategize about future directions the Town might take in order to give feedback to this office and the Town Board.

As part of their process, we want to hear your opinions on important issues facing the Town. This survey has been developed to help the 20/20 committee and others in Town Government decide on key budgeting and service issues as well as determine the direction the Town should take to address future needs.

You are one of 1,500 randomly selected residents who have the opportunity to complete this survey. To ensure that survey results are truly representative of resident opinion, it is important that each questionnaire be completed and returned by the person to whom it is addressed. You are assured complete anonymity if you remove the mailing label; the questionnaire is not coded and does not require any identifying information. Returned surveys will be tabulated at no cost by Policy Research Associates, Inc. and results given to the 2020 committee and made available to Town residents.

Please complete and return the enclosed survey by refolding this mailing so the Town of Bethlehem postage paid address is displayed and mailing the survey **by April 17, 2009**. Thank you for your interest and involvement in this project. We look forward to your participation in shaping the future of Bethlehem.

Very truly yours,

John H. Cunningham
Town Supervisor

Town of Bethlehem – Community Survey 2009

Please take a few minutes to complete this survey. After completion, please return the survey following directions on the front page. Thank you for your participation.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Please read each question carefully. Some questions require you to choose only one answer but others allow for two or more answers.

IMPORTANT! *If you mark more answers than allowed, none of your answers to that question will be counted.*

A. YOUR OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

1. Taking all things into consideration, how do you rate the overall quality of life in the Town of Bethlehem compared to other areas in the Capital Region?

- ☐ Better in Bethlehem than in other places
- ☐ About the same in Bethlehem as in other places
- ☐ Worse in Bethlehem than in other places
- ☐ No opinion

2. How would you rate the quality of life in Bethlehem compared to five years ago?

- ☐ Better
- ☐ About the same
- ☐ Worse
- ☐ No opinion/I did not live here five years ago

Why? _____

3. What do you like most about living in Bethlehem?

4. What do you like least about living in Bethlehem?

B. TOWN SERVICES AND PERFORMANCE

The following section lists specific services provided by the Town of Bethlehem. Please rate how important it is that the Town provides each of these services. Then rate how satisfied you are with how well the Town is providing that service.

On the 1st scale, 1 is the lowest rating and 5 is the highest. If you have no opinion, leave it blank. On the 2nd scale, 1 is below expectations, 2 meets expectations, and 3 exceeds expectations. Please circle one answer for importance and one for satisfaction, for each specific service statement. If you have no opinion, leave it blank.

	How important is it this service be provided.					How service compares to your expectations.		
	Low			High		Below	Meets	Exceeds
ROAD AND SIDEWALK SERVICES								
Improving neighborhood streets and intersections	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Maintaining existing streets and sidewalks	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Keeping neighborhood streets free of snow and ice	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Making improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Brush and leaves curbside collection	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
WATER AND SANITARY SEWER SERVICES	Low			High		Below	Meets	Exceeds
Water billing and payment services	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Water taste and quality	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Reliable and consistent water pressure	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Reliable sewer system	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
POLICE SERVICES	Low			High		Below	Meets	Exceeds
Enforcing traffic laws (Speeding, D.U.I., etc.)	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Policing of the community through patrols	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Police response to traffic incidents and other citizen calls	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Police response to medical emergency call	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Providing prompt and courteous 911 operations	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
TOWN COMMUNICATION	Low			High		Below	Meets	Exceeds
Providing information via quarterly "Bethlehem Report"	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Providing information via monthly E-Mail newsletter	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Providing information to citizens via website	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Broadcasting Town meetings on cable channel 18	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
	Low			High		Below	Meets	Exceeds
OTHER PROGRAMS, SERVICES AND FACILITIES								
Building & code enforcement services	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Maintaining public lands, buildings and facilities	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Beautifying the community with landscaping	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Transfer station/ Recycling Program	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Supporting business and economic development	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Senior services	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Youth services/ Youth employment	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3
Parks and Recreational Services	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3

5a. What Town program(s) or service(s), if any, do you believe requires the most improvement?

b. What improvement(s) do you believe should be made? _____

6. What Town program(s) or service(s), if any, do you believe could be eliminated? Please list.

7. What additional service(s), if any, do you believe the Town should provide? Please list.

8. If the Town were to enhance an existing service or institute new programs or services that were needed within the community, how do you believe these programs and services should be funded? *With 1 being the funding method you would support the most and 6 being the funding method you would support the least please rank the following list from 1-6.*

_____ Increase property tax levy

_____ Seek new outside revenue sources to supplement Town funding

_____ Use existing funds but decrease funding for other programs and services

_____ Fund through fees for service and/or user fees

_____ Charge additional fees to access Town facilities and parks

_____ Do not enhance existing or add new programs and services

9. Which statement is closest to your view regarding the current level of Town programs and services knowing that the level of programs and services is directly related to the need for property taxes

Please choose one.

- ☐ Decrease programs and services
- ☐ Keep programs and services at current levels
- ☐ Increase programs and services
- ☐ I don't know – no opinion

10. The 20/20 Committee believes that the Town will be faced with challenges on how it focuses its resources in the coming years. For each Town service listed below, please indicate where you believe services should be increased, decreased, or maintained.

For each listed Town service and facility, check the one box that you most agree with:

<u>Town Service and Facilities</u>	<u>Increase Services/ Spending</u>	<u>Maintain Services/ Spending</u>	<u>Decrease Services/ Spending</u>
Highways (sidewalks, roads, snow/ice removal)	☐	☐	☐
Public Works (water, sewer and storm water systems)	☐	☐	☐
Public Safety (Police and Town Court)	☐	☐	☐
Parks & Recreation, Youth Services	☐	☐	☐
Planning & Economic Development	☐	☐	☐
Senior Services	☐	☐	☐
Facilities (Town Hall & Annex)	☐	☐	☐
Other: _____	☐	☐	☐

C. YOUR OPINION ON IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING THE TOWN

11. Investment Alternatives facing Town Government. The 20/20 committee has identified several major investments, listed below, that the Town may need to make in the near future despite the fact that it has limited resources to invest.

With 1 being most desirable and 4 being least desirable, please rank the following list of investment alternatives that you believe the Town should consider and please identify any other alternatives that you believe should be considered:

_____ **Invest in aging Town infrastructure** including water and wastewater treatment plants and hundreds of miles of underground pipe

_____ **Upgrade outdated or inadequate public facilities** including Town Hall and the Town Hall Annex (Justice Court and Police Department), the Elm Ave. Park Pool facilities, and the need for community meeting room facilities

_____ **Invest in farmland and open space conservation** to protect and preserve our community's natural resources

_____ **Other:** _____

12. Paying for Needed Public Improvements: The Town has historically used current operating revenues from sales tax, mortgage recording tax and property taxes as its primary funding source for both ongoing operations and also capital expenditures. Unfortunately, this has resulted in deferred maintenance of certain Town infrastructure and facilities and the growing need for major capital expenditures. By way of example, over the next ten years, the Town's primary water and waste water treatment plants both need major upgrades estimated to cost more than \$30 million. The Town will need to borrow to pay for these improvements and will need to consider financial alternatives like those listed below, to enable it to make the debt service payments on the bonds.

With 1 being most desirable and 6 being least desirable, please rank the following list of financial alternatives that you believe the Town should consider to pay for needed public improvements and please identify any other alternatives that you believe should be considered:

_____ **Increase property taxes** to the level necessary to pay the debt service on the bonds;

_____ **Defer maintenance** on Town infrastructure and buildings and only pay for the needed improvements to the extent that they can be supported by existing budget and tax levels;

_____ Evaluate programs and services and **reduce or eliminate existing expenditures** and re-allocate the funds to pay for the needed improvements;

_____ Distinguish between essential and non-essential Town services and **charge reasonable user fees** for non-essential services using the proceeds to pay for the needed improvements;

_____ **Encourage new non-residential development** in appropriately planned and zoned locations and utilize new tax revenues to pay for the needed improvements

_____ **Other:** _____

13. **Consolidation and shared services among the governmental units providing services to Town residents:** Municipal services are provided by various taxing entities in the Town of Bethlehem. They are New York State, Albany County, the Town of Bethlehem, three school and library districts (Bethlehem, Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk and Guilderland), five fire districts (Delmar, Elsmere, Selkirk, Slingerlands & Elmwood Park), and three ambulance districts (Delmar, Bethlehem & No. Bethlehem). Each unit provides specific services to the community and (with the exception of New York State) is funded in whole or in part through a property tax levy. The 20/20 Committee believes that there is potential to improve efficiencies through the consolidation or sharing of certain public services that have similar purposes and characteristics. Some examples of ways we might work to combine operations, eliminate layers of government and share municipal services are listed below:

- The shared purchase, and utilization of specialized and heavy equipment
- Lawn mowing and landscaping; Snow plowing and snow removal
- Consolidation of Emergency Dispatch, Assessment and Tax Collection services at the County level
- Participation in a regional water authority

Which of the following statements best represents your view on how the Town should approach consolidation or the sharing of municipal services? For each of the statements below, please indicate if you agree, disagree or have no opinion by putting a check mark in the appropriate box next to each statement:

Statement Regarding Consolidation & Shared Services	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion
I prefer that all services currently provided by the Town government remain under Town control			
I would be willing to give up Town control of services only where there are demonstrated and significant cost savings or improved services			
I would support municipal consolidation or shared services with other municipalities where residents of the other municipality benefit, even if there was no clear benefit to Bethlehem residents			
In general, Town government should continuously be evaluating opportunities for improved services and reduced operating costs through consolidation of programs and services both within Town government and with other governmental units			
Other: _____			

D. RESPONDENT PROFILE

14. What is your age?

- ☐ 18 – 35
- ☐ 36 – 50
- ☐ 51 – 64
- ☐ 65+

15. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

16. How many people are in your household? _____

17. How many years have you lived in the Town of Bethlehem? ____

18. Your current work status is:

- ☐ Work in the Town of Bethlehem (not at home)
- ☐ Work elsewhere in Albany County
- ☐ Work outside Albany County
- ☐ Work at home
- ☐ Currently unemployed
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Disabled
- ☐ Other: (please specify: _____)

19. Do you...

- ☐ Own your residence
- ☐ Rent your residence
- ☐ Live with parents or relatives

20. In which “neighborhood” within the Town of Bethlehem do you live?

- ☐ North Bethlehem
- ☐ Slingerlands
- ☐ Delmar/Elsmere
- ☐ Bethlehem Center/Glenmont
- ☐ Feura Bush/Houcks Corners
- ☐ Riverfront District
- ☐ South Albany
- ☐ Selkirk
- ☐ South Bethlehem

21. Do you have any additional thoughts, comments or suggestions to share with the Bethlehem 20/20 Advisory Committee?

Thank you.

Please complete and return the enclosed survey by refolding this mailing so the Town of Bethlehem Business Reply mail (postage paid) address is displayed and mailing the survey **by April 17, 2009.**

Please remove or black out label if anonymity is an issue

PRSR1 STD
ECRWSS
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
Delmar, NY
Permit No. 2222

The Town of
Bethlehem

The Town of Bethlehem

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK SURVEY

**Your Opinion Counts;
Let Us Know What You Think**

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