

CHAPTER 3: Community Issues Identification

Issues and Assets of Buffalo

During spring 2006, the Buffalo Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee discussed what they viewed as the problems, needs, positive aspects, and assets of the City of Buffalo. This information helped identify where the community should be focusing its efforts for both solving issues and preserving what is special about Buffalo. The Steering Committee comments were as follows:

Problems/Needs

- Methamphetamine
- Workforce housing
- Sustainable wages
- Lack of clean industry
- Dated comprehensive plan (lose efficiency)
- Funding
- Infrastructure needs
- Loss of natural resources; agricultural production
- Traffic – one route through town
- Lack of direction – Tourism? Agriculture? CBM?
- Economic shift away from agriculture
- Encourage xeroscaping
- Retirees – paying their way?
- A lot of resentment against people coming in to retire
- How to keep city looking nice – especially by the long-timers
- How to build personal pride of place
- Junk cars
- Enforcement
- Perceptual problem with retail
- Leakage – need to provide some thing unique
- Tourists – how to keep them here as a destination
- More destination retail
- 25% of high school seniors did not graduate last year
- Coal bed methane
- Spillover affect from adjoining counties
- A lot of commuters
- Active, vocal committee opposed to land use planning
- Very low unemployment; lack of available unskilled workers
- One main electrical distribution source
- Street lights that both provide safety and protect dark night skies
- Connecting walks and paths from residential areas to businesses and destination sites
- Wise water use education

- More recycling and energy efficiency

Assets/Positives

- Volunteer fire department
- Volunteers
- People are the best
- Location – Big Horn Mountains
- Occidental
- At the intersection of two interstates
- City amenities
- Recreation opportunities
- Youth-oriented programs
- Schools
- Job openings
- Coal bed methane
- Located at edge of huge coal reserves
- Located close to the electrical grid
- Best climate available in the state
- Great tasting municipal water
- Interest by people to be part of solutions

As noted in the Introduction, in 2001 one of the Wyoming Rural Development Council resource teams conducted 240 interviews in Buffalo. The purpose of the interviews were to get a handle on what the local population regarded as Buffalo's major problems, challenges, strengths, and assets. The responses focused primarily on the City's problems and challenges, with comments falling into eight themes: capital facilities, housing, planning/growth management/economic development, telecomm/technology, transportation, workforce, recreation/tourism, and human services. A review of the items tallied on the 2001 list (found in the Introduction of this plan) show that very little has changed in the public perception of the issues confronting Buffalo.

Photo Board of Community Likes and Dislikes

In July 2006, the Steering Committee members were given 30 disposable cameras for distribution to local citizens of all ages to take photos of what they liked and did not like about Buffalo. The individuals were given a sheet of paper on which they identified the photos they took and whether it was considered a positive or negative feature. By August, the used cameras were returned to City Hall to be developed. Their photos were then used for a display illustrating the pros and cons of Buffalo at a public open house in the fall.

Approximately 500 photos were submitted that illustrated what the community believed were the City's high and low points. Parks, walking paths, downtown, waterways, recreation facilities, schools, businesses, and City staff were examples of positive aspects

of Buffalo. Unsightly yards, weeds, junk vehicles, housing shortages, the price of gasoline, vacant downtown buildings, and lack of things for teenagers to do were among the items cited as negative points.

Survey Results from Voter Questionnaire

Opinion Survey

The project team prepared and mailed an opinion survey to a sample of registered Buffalo voters during the week of October 13th, 2006. The original sample consisted of 440 voters, randomly drawn from the voter list of 2,200 Buffalo voters. The sample list included a number of registrants who no longer lived in Buffalo or had invalid mailing addresses. The actual number of surveys that were able to be delivered was 379. Of these, 249 (66 percent) were returned as completed surveys. A copy of the complete survey and the tabulated results are found in the Appendix. A summary of the survey results are discussed below.

Ratings

The first group of questions focused on the rating of various aspects about Buffalo, with the choices being 'good', 'fair', or 'poor.' Also tallied were the spaces that were left blank for either N/A or 'no response.'

People liked the following items about Buffalo: parks, emergency services, swimming and summer recreation facilities, bike and walking paths, and the number of doctors, dentists, and nurses. When the tallies for 'good' and 'fair' are combined, the appearance of store fronts is also viewed quite favorably, along with hospital services, activities for children, and public schools. Items rated on the plus side of fair include water supply and quality, law enforcement and crime control, activities for adults, and adequate parking downtown.

On the reverse side, items rated as fair or slightly less than fair are communication between citizens and the City, condition of streets, condition of sidewalks, condition of housing in the City, retail item availability, current local industry, industrial development efforts, and retail development efforts. By far the number one item viewed as poor is adequate housing for all income groups. This was followed by public transportation, and the community center.

It was interesting to see which items popped up with a sizable number of blanks which tells us the items are not available, not of interest to the respondent, or the respondent is not aware of the item. This included vocational schools, drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, and the airport.

The most significant findings of this section are that over three-quarters of the respondents thought there is inadequate housing for all income levels, and the outdoor

recreation opportunities that the City provides (parks, swimming facilities, and bike and walking paths) are very highly regarded.

Need or Not Need

The second round of questions focused on eight items, asking the reader to judge whether more of each item was needed. The items being considered were population growth, new housing, land use planning, recreation facilities, industrial development, community services, retail development, and expansion of city water and sewer systems.

The number one need was identified as land use planning: 80 percent of respondents said it is needed. This runs counter to the perception that land owners are not interested in guidelines and potential regulations for how development should occur. The second most cited need is for new housing, followed closely by retail development and water and sewer line expansion.

The lone item that was clearly not desired was population growth; 63 percent of the respondents said it was not needed. A few commented that it is going to happen any way, so it didn't matter what their opinion was about it.

Vehicle Traffic

The last batch of questions centered on issues related to Buffalo's traffic. These asked the readers whether they agreed, disagreed, or had no opinion in response to an assortment of traffic-related statements.

The statement that generated the most agreement (84 percent) was to make sure that new subdivisions did not worsen traffic conditions. In addition, 80 percent agreed that traffic congestion is a problem only at certain times and at isolated locations, and likewise 80 percent said traffic congestion is not a problem throughout Buffalo.

A slight majority (53 percent) agreed that traffic congestion is not a problem in general. However, 59 percent also noted that traffic congestion is getting worse. This is worth noting as it indicates the public's growing concern about traffic.

Mild interest (44 percent) existed for encouraging alternatives to automobile travel. A majority did agree that streets needed to be improved and upgraded to reduce congestion, and both speed control and traffic reduction is warranted in residential areas.

Two of the statements generated less decisive results: whether the city is responding adequately to growth, and if new subdivision developments have been beneficial. In the first case, 42 percent of the respondents did not agree that the city was responding adequately to growth, while 29 percent said they were and 29 percent had no opinion or left the space blank. Taking a look at new subdivision developments, 40 percent said they have been beneficial, 35 percent did not believe they were beneficial, and 25 percent

had no opinion or left the space blank. In both cases, the responses show a substantial ambivalence about how growth and development is being handled in the city.

Written Comments

Space was provided on the survey for written comments, and 107 comments were included with the surveys (written comments can be found in the Appendix). In reading the comments, it seemed that a few major categories emerged:

- Lack of housing and housing affordability
- Traffic control (speed, road conditions, bypass)
- Support for planning and/or zoning
- Local gas prices
- Cost of living (retail, taxes)
- Make new subdivisions pay for their own infrastructure or institute impact fees

On the flip side, there were random complaints about the survey, the cost of water, and about Wal-Mart's hiring practices. Most by far appeared to be eager to share their views in a positive manner and voiced their concern that Buffalo remain the place they had chosen to call home.

Public Open House

The first public open house was held November 1, 2006. About 50 people were in attendance, in addition to the project team. Two comment forms were handed out, one asking for feedback about the mission statement and the other for answers to three questions about Buffalo and one open ended request for comments. Two aerial maps were on display, with the request that people mark down where they thought pathways should go, and where there were transportation-related issues. The questions and their related comments were:

Mission Statement

- Continue to encourage volunteer groups and their participation in building our community.
- Include something about our 'rich history' or 'frontier heritage'. We should be determined to preserve our setting with a commitment to provide a robust economy. Take out 'local guidance and sound planning'.
- What is meant by 'looks favorably to its future'?
- This is a fine statement with no substance.

Are there other things that you like or don't like about Buffalo?

- There are many people who have lived here a long time who seem to hope to stop change. How to convince them that's not possible?
- Why is the retail price of gas/diesel so high? Don't the trucks that deliver the cheaper fuel to Sheridan go right past Buffalo? If it's cheaper to buy fuel in Sheridan (including the round trip) why not go to Wal-Mart and the retail stores there too?
- I love Buffalo. Moderately controlled growth would be good. Too much government control is never good.
- More community cooperation.
- I like just about every thing about Buffalo.
- I don't like that there is nothing for the youth to do. We need things to do so we don't get in trouble.
- Head-in-the-sand mentality. Need to provide incentives to developers to develop sustainable responsible communities.
- The high school livestock facility – like it. The youth that run around like chickens with their heads cut off cuz they have no place to go – don't like.
- It seems at the entrance to Buffalo off the interstates are always the messiest places!
- Like: Small town; Wyoming atmosphere; cooperation of people; location; government accessibility. Dislikes: Entrances on all sides are being 'trashed' with welding outfits, old equipment and junk; could have better retail outlets.

What do you think will be the biggest issues facing Buffalo in the next five years?

- Housing
- We just built two new schools and the elementary school is not that old. Isn't all this 'wonderful' projected growth going to call for more infrastructure and MORE new schools? Will all the 'wonderful' projected growth pay for all the needed support systems that go with it?
- Low cost housing; too many subdivisions – water/sewer/streets
- Control of growth
- Infrastructure (water and sewer); affordable housing
- Town-county cooperation; infrastructure sizing and financing
- Getting everything up to par and cleaned up.
- Increased population and traffic; increased taxes
- Drugs, and people moving to Buffalo
- Not growing responsibly: population growth, transient population; Californians selling houses for \$1 million and buying here \$450K+
- #1 traffic, #2 water
- The drop-out rate at the high school
- Growth and the management of it
- Infrastructure (water, sewer); trucks through town on Hwy 16 West; affordable store space (retail)

If Buffalo is to expand its city limits, which direction should it be toward?

- East to I-90 and south
- Who ‘makes out’ when all this growth occurs besides realtors, land owners who sell and merchants? Doesn’t the existing population support the existing merchants? The rest of us lose ‘quality of life’ – keep the small town small! East (if it must)
- South
- Up Fort Street – West
- East and west
- No comment
- East
- Don’t care
- South
- Don’t really care
- North
- Expand north, south and east. Try not to expand toward the mountains.

Other comments?

- The ‘preserve the current way of life’ argument and a dollar will buy a cup of coffee. Our way of life (including ranching) will adapt to reality or disappear altogether.
- Why is bigger better? Is it really? Buffalo has a small town charm. That is a prime reason I moved here. Getting bigger will lose that charm. If you want a bigger town/city – move to Sheridan or Gillette!
- Hub and spoke trails into county; regional potable water; cross-town ‘river walk’ potential
- Clean up the entrances to Buffalo. Make it some place people do want to stop and see.
- Need a convention center – where and how, I don’t know but we’re missing out on \$\$ by not having facilities to accommodate 300+ people conventions.
Alternative #1 – need for higher density housing [best future land use plan]

In addition to the above, the team had conversations with attendees who raised issues. One couple noted that the entryways from I-25 are bad junkyards and about one falling-down house as being a health hazard. They discussed their frustration about not knowing where things are, noting that newspaper articles and locals use legal descriptions or general landmarks to describe locations, without mentioning an address. They wished that more addresses were given so they could figure out what is being discussed.

Taking a look at the aerials that were on display, people identified problem intersections and potential pathway expansions. They also selected several routes for potential

bike/pedestrian paths. All these locations are discussed in the Transportation chapter of the plan.