

Partnership evaluates direction for future Better communication with Borough Council seen as need for group

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FREEHOLD — It is evident that a wedge is developing between the Freehold Center Partnership, which oversees activities in the borough's Special Improvement District (SID), and the Borough Council, which is responsible for the overall well-being of the community.

This was made clear during a brainstorming session held on Jan. 29 at the Courtyard on Main, East Main Street, among members of both groups. The session was attended by 36 people, which included council representatives, partnership representatives, business owners and operators and residents.

Don Smartt, of Community Advocates, Verona, an expert on SIDs, served as the meeting's facilitator. Smartt had initially helped to launch Freehold's SID.

The intended focus of the meeting was to solicit suggestions as to what role the partnership should play and what its goals should be in the borough in the next five years, but the session became much more than that.

"A tension has developed between the partnership and local government," Councilwoman Sharon Shutzer said. "It seems that sometimes the partnership oversteps its bounds and there is a lack of communication between our two bodies."

The partnership, and eventually the SID, were born in the late 1980s with the borough's now-defunct Economic Development Committee (EDC), whose members were seeking ways to further the renaissance of the borough and its downtown business district. It was determined that the governing body would be reluctant to pour more funds into the project at that time.

Several members of the EDC, notably the late Jeff Jones, operator of the Court Jester, and John Ballew, of Ballew Jewelers, decided to organize a select group of downtown business people, along with other interested individuals and institutions, to form the partnership and address problems in the county seat's downtown business district, designated as Freehold Center. The resulting SID became operational in late 1992.

The following goals were outlined in the partnership's original mission statement:

- To foster the center's economic development.
- To encourage the center's revitalization.
- To preserve the center's historic past.
- To strengthen the economic, cultural and commercial contributions of the center to the residents and property owners of the borough.

The SID is currently funded through the collection of a tax that is assessed on properties located in the area of the municipality that has been designated as the improvement district.

Just about everybody, from both the partnership and the council, agreed that most of the goals originally set for the SID have been reached, but new problems have surfaced and the partnership must determine what role it must play in the future.

Improving communications between the partnership and the council in the near future is a must if new goals are to be reached, Smartt said.

Smartt said responses to a questionnaire sent out to current business operators and property owners within the SID indicate that people do not really know what the partnership is.

"There are some people who think it is a branch of the local government," Smartt said. "It is not. It is a separate entity unto itself."

Borough Attorney Kerry Higgins pointed out that the SID is allowed through a state statute. It was also pointed out that the council has the ability to abolish the SID by refusing to approve its annual budget.

Not one person at the Jan. 29 meeting suggested this as a solution for any existing or developing problems within the SID.

"I do think the partnership should rewrite its mission every couple of years," Higgins said.

"New problems have surfaced and some of the old ones have transformed into other problems," Smartt said. "You are in a county seat and that makes your SID different. I think you should create a delegation to visit other county seats that have SIDs and learn from what they have done and are doing. Your future is in your hands and there are examples of it out there in other towns if you look for them. There are still hills to be climbed and goals to be reached. You have to determine what they are."

It was suggested that the partnership is in need of new leadership.

"Most of us left from the charter group of members are tired," said Joseph Gilpin, a charter member. "We have to generate new members to take over."

Smartt said responses to the questionnaire indicate that the biggest problems faced by the downtown area are business mix, traffic flow and new population demographics.

"The first two were original problems and they remain so," Smartt said. "The change in the town's demographics is one that many communities throughout the state and the country are facing. Some communities have dealt with this last problem. You should find out how they have dealt with it."

"You may have to go through the whole process that the original members of the partnership did to reach your goals. The partnership and the governing body must improve communications and cooperate in order to reach goals that are common to both groups," he said.