

Haverhill Entrepreneurial Encouragement Committee

HAVERHILL (NH) BUSINESS SURVEY

January 24, 2019

“The only policy likely to succeed is to try to make the future.” – Peter Drucker

BACKGROUND

At the April 13-14, 2018 “Better Haverhill” forum, residents identified supporting businesses and new business creation as high priorities for the town of Haverhill, NH. As a result, interested citizens created the Haverhill Entrepreneurial Encouragement Committee (HEEC) with a goal to support existing businesses, help grow new entrepreneurial ventures, and expand the town’s tax base. Initial thoughts included:

1. Strengthening lines of communication between the local government and businesses, so that the town will better understand the needs of the businesses within our community and ways to support them.
2. Identifying and supporting incentives to create and grow businesses in Haverhill.
3. Creating a system to disseminate information to new and potential businesses on start-up and operational aspects of owning a business, including a mentorship program connecting current and retired business owners with those looking to start a new business.
4. Strengthening relationships between Haverhill schools and businesses.
5. Supporting efforts to market business properties including the industrial park and using the airport as a business resource.

In sum, HEEC is seeking the most effective approaches to support current Haverhill businesses, attract businesses to come to Haverhill, and encourage home-grown talent to start their own businesses. We are looking especially for practical steps and activities that we can control at the local level. While seeking state and federal assistance can be helpful, we want to do our best to control our own destiny with solutions we can implement ourselves.

HEEC is not an official town committee, but operates openly with meetings at 6 PM on the third Wednesday of every month at the town office. Current HEEC membership is listed in the Appendix. We welcome interested individuals to participate in our meetings and join HEEC. If you are interested, please contact Kevin Shelton (kshelton@uvpress.com).

Creating a mentorship program for individuals interested in starting up a business was the first HEEC priority and is underway in collaboration with the Cohase Region Chamber of Commerce. Individuals willing to serve as mentors, or who would like to receive the support of a mentor, can contact Erik Volk (cohasechamber@gmail.com). HEEC also developed a list of vacant business properties which is available to interested parties.

“Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it!”
– Goethe

BUSINESS SURVEY METHODOLOGY

To better understand the business challenges and opportunities in Haverhill, HEEC initiated a survey of Haverhill business owners. The primary focus of this survey was businesses located in Haverhill that are owned and operated by Haverhill residents. HEEC members developed a list designed to represent a cross-section of town businesses and divided up the list among committee members for face-to-face meetings. We approached about 25 businesses and secured interviews with 18 business owners (see Appendix). A script of the interview questions is also included in the Appendix.

While we sought out a cross-section of Haverhill businesses, the committee fully understands that this data is not fully inclusive of the views of Haverhill business owners. We welcome additional feedback and suggestions; please send to Doug Teschner (dteschner@GrowingLeadershipLLC.com).

SURVEY RESULTS

The HEEC interview team received many ideas and thoughts about the current business climate and Haverhill businesses. These are some of the most commonly mentioned topics.

Mixed Impressions of the Business Climate. While there is broad understanding that national and statewide unemployment is low and the general economy is strong, a number of people interviewed noted that this does not necessarily mean things are going well in Haverhill. Much of the national prosperity is bypassing our community. The need for increasing the tax base and attracting new businesses was expressed by a number of those interviewed.

Staffing and Workforce Readiness Concerns. A number of those interviewed expressed challenges with hiring quality workers, including fewer applicants for open positions. While some of this is a result of the generally strong economy and low statewide unemployment, a number of those interviewed expressed difficulties finding people with the most basic work skills such as reliability, positive attitudes toward work, dressing professionally, and showing up on time. Low levels of critical thinking skills were also mentioned as a concern.

School Concerns. A number of people expressed concerns about the quality of Haverhill schools. Insufficient preparation of the workforce is a common observation. More practical skills such as expanded computer education were also mentioned. One person observed that the vote to improve Woodsville High School was very positive for the town and, while property taxes are high, “sometimes we need to spend money to make money,” and an improved high school can bring in tuition money from surrounding towns. One person told us that we need to, “make the school system a destination.”

Poor Cell Phone Accessibility. This is not a new issue, but there is strong agreement that it is critical that it be addressed if the town is going to move forward. Attracting businesses to Haverhill is severely handicapped by the status quo. High speed internet is a similar concern.

Need for Greater Town Unity. While there are historical reasons why Haverhill is fragmented, a number of those interviewed advocated for moving forward with a stronger identity of Haverhill as one town. Having three separate fire departments, two road crews, four independent precincts, and other such duplication of services is costly and inefficient and makes marketing the community more difficult (although one person mentioned the current precincts as a town strength).

Need for a More Positive, Proactive Town Government. A number of people mentioned that Haverhill needs a more strategic approach to addressing town priorities with less time spent on issues such as selling food on public land or town message signs. The need for a more welcoming, pro-business attitude was cited as was the need for a stronger select board and town leaders who proactively support local business and promote what the town has to offer. One person observed that, “the Selectmen need to stop bickering and put a positive foot forward to lead this charge for new business.” He added, “I believe the people in this town need positive leaders that can turn our assets into business opportunity and to stop nit picking.” Better communication between town government and businesses was also noted.

Marketing of Haverhill’s Positive Attributes to Outsiders. “We need to draw from the outside,” was expressed by a number of people given that Haverhill does not have enough money in town to build up the economic base. The town needs an information packet, materials on the website, etc. to make the town more attractive to outsiders, including businesses and retirees. “We are open and we are awesome” was a message suggested by one person interviewed. Another noted that the town needs an impressive website and professional social media presence that emphasizes the many positives.

Airport Awareness and Marketing. One person observed that we are fortunate to have an airport in this town, but many do not understand this and the airport is an asset that is basically untapped. A program to help folks understand the positive aspects of having a small airport in town should be part of the media presence, he said. Another person observed that a new employee was attracted to come to town because of the airport.

Mentoring and Training. We found considerable support for the mentoring program underway by HEEC. One person said, “I believe there is a supply of expertise that could benefit both existing businesses as well as start-up concepts.” Training for future business leaders and also those interested in serving in town government was also mentioned, including developing effective leaders who “don’t have axes to grind and can take the heat.”

Encouraging Small Businesses. While there are several large employers in Haverhill (Cottage Hospital, Wal Mart, Grafton County, and the school system), a number of those interviewed cited a need to focus on building up and encouraging small businesses as the backbone of the community. A program to encourage people to shop locally was also mentioned. One person wondered why the attempted farmers market didn’t do better.

Creating a Town Business Directory. This was mentioned by several of those interviewed.

Business Incentives. Several ideas surfaced during the interviews including tax increment financing (a lower tax rate for a new business startup period), business start-up money, low interest loans, and creating a business incubator such as Bradford’s new Space on Main St.

“That is Just the Way It Is.” Some people interviewed expressed a fatalistic view toward improving Haverhill. There was also some skepticism expressed toward HEEC given that some past efforts at improving Haverhill businesses were not sustained over time. Others expressed frustration about these kinds of negative attitudes. One person observed that Haverhill can be “very narrow minded,” and another mentioned widespread cynicism. As noted by one person interviewed, successful businesses need to constantly adapt to change and we need to bring this same approach to our community as

whole. This may be the single greatest barrier to overcome in order to proactively move Haverhill forward.

Other Ideas Expressed.

- Lower property taxes.
- Town beautification.
- Creating historical museums to each village.
- More state support, including school funding.
- Less state and federal regulations and regulations better suited for small businesses (for example, it costs a small restaurant the same for liquor license as a large establishment). Asking the state to reduce the rooms and meal tax in Woodsville was mentioned.
- Industrial park development brought mixed feelings (One person wondered if Haverhill was too late).
- Haverhill having its own chamber of commerce was suggested by one person. Another mentioned having the town host/sponsor conferences or webinars on business related topics.
- Continue to survey more businesses was suggested.
- Creating a town business group that could foster more competitive health insurance and other benefit rates was suggested.

“Nothing good happens by accident.” – Ken Blanchard

RECOMMENDATIONS

While HEEC’s authority is limited to being primarily a catalyst and facilitator, we are eager to partner with local government. We have listed recommendations below according to which local government entity would have the lead authority, and we have also identified some activities HEEC can do on our own.

1. Recommendations to the Haverhill Select Board

Cell Phone/Broadband Solutions. This needs to be a high priority activity for the town. We have read reports of available federal funds and urge our town officials to actively pursue this (see, for example, <https://nenc.news/state-official-went-roaming-around-vermont-to-test-cell-coverage-claims/>). We suggest reaching out to the Northern Border Commission and North Country Council for possible support. We cannot emphasize enough how critical this is for the future development of our town.

A More Proactive, Business-friendly Town Government with a Strategic Marketing Plan. We suggest that Haverhill develop and implement a comprehensive strategic plan for town that includes a marketing plan to attract outside businesses. HEEC plans to reach out to outside expertise that might be involved in this process.

Business Development as a Town Manager Priority. With the process under way to hire a new town manager, we recommend that this be emphasized in the job description and encourage the selection committee and select board to prioritize candidates with experience in business development.

Promoting Town Unity. We encourage a fresh look at ways we can promote Haverhill as one town, not just a collection of precincts, including invigorating the website with a prominent section on business promotion as well as creating pro-business materials that promote the town as a whole.

Greater Collaboration with School Board. We believe that the town and business environment would be strengthened by greater collaboration and regular meetings between the Select Board and School Board and between the Town Manager and Superintendent.

2. Recommendations to the Haverhill School Board

Stronger Collaboration Between Businesses and Woodsville High School. We believe that this is critical for the town, and we urge the school board and superintendent to expand efforts to strengthen relationships with local businesses and implement expanded extended learning opportunities for high school students (including job shadowing, partners in education, career fairs, internships and apprenticeships).

Expanded Opportunities for Workforce and Vocational Education. We support the Haverhill schools using available resources to the greatest extent possible to address community workforce opportunities. To extent that the Haverhill schools are unable to provide vocational education for students not adequately served by traditional high school offerings, we proactively support sending more Haverhill students to Riverbend Technical Center (Oxbow Vocational) in Bradford, VT for a half or even full-day program.

Higher School Standards. Any effort to attract businesses to Haverhill requires us to upgrade the quality of Haverhill schools. Haverhill is well-situated to be an alternative to Hanover-Lebanon area where business property and housing are so expensive, yet many people won't come to Haverhill unless they are confident that their children will get a quality education. That said, Haverhill is clearly between a rock and a hard place: a recent article in the NH Business Review cites Haverhill as one of the state's 19 "property-poor cities and towns with more than 1,000 residents where the assessed property value per capita is less than 65 percent of the statewide median" (<https://www.nhbr.com/September-28-2018/The-other-New-Hampshire/>). Despite this challenge, we see no alternative to investing more in our schools if we want to make our town stronger.

Strategic Plan for Haverhill Schools. We need an updated strategic plan with a vision of how the town will move forward to meet student and community needs given projected enrollments.

Greater Collaboration with Select Board. As stated previously, we believe that the town and business environment would be strengthened by greater collaboration and regular meetings between the Select Board and School Board and between the Town Manager and Superintendent.

3. Recommendations for HEEC

While HEEC is prepared to actively partner in the various activities listed above, we are prepared to move forward on our own as follows.

Seek Outside Expertise for a Fresh Perspective. To support HEEC, the town manager, and select board, we recommend that the town identify outside support to help us strategically focus on business development and promotion. Plymouth State University has expressed interest in the past and HEEC

will explore this and other ideas. There are opportunities out there if we educate ourselves and take advantage (for example, the 2017 tax law changes included the creation of opportunity zones where investors can put capital to work financing new projects and enterprises in exchange for certain federal capital gains tax advantages (<https://eig.org/opportunityzones/about>)).

Study the Littleton Model. Not so long ago, Littleton, NH, was more like Haverhill, but today it is in a much stronger position economically and socially. For example, one person interviewed observed that it is fun to go there. While no two towns are precisely comparable, we think there would be value in meeting with some of the Littleton leaders who spearheaded past changes to see if there are steps we could apply to our town.

Mentoring and Training. HEEC will continue to implement the mentoring program with the Cohase Chamber of Commerce and explore other ways to training for future business and town leaders.

“The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark.” – Michelangelo

FINAL THOUGHTS

Despite many challenges facing our community, as one person interviewed observed, there is “no magic bullet” to move Haverhill forward. HEEC will continue to gather information and target efforts to address areas we see as having the highest impact that are also practical and doable. We understand the feedback that some past community efforts have not been sustainable and want to avoid this by not overreaching. Change will require a sustained effort by multiple partners -- HEEC cannot alone, and we also need more people to serve on our committee. We also understand that resistance to change may be strong and we anticipate naysayers. While change can be painful, it is necessary to set a course and sustain the effort over time if we want to move Haverhill forward. We welcome others to join us and be part of the solution!

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Businesses Surveyed

- Aldrich’s General Store
- An Affair to Remember/Everything but the Cook
- Blackmount Country Club
- Blackmount Equipment
- Bridge Weekly
- Cottage Hospital
- Eastman Electric
- HJ Graham Agency
- Hatchland Farm
- Mountain Milk

- Orion Wire
- PT Farm
- Robinson family businesses (Nootka Lodge, All Seasons Motel and Plaza, Always Fit, Dan's Data Destruction)
- Saltwater Bar & Bistro
- Trendy Times
- Upper Valley Press
- Walker Auto Sales
- Woodsville Guaranty Savings Bank

Appendix 2: Survey Questions

Introduction

As we discussed on the phone or by email, the Haverhill Entrepreneurial Encouragement Committee has been created with a goal to support existing and help grow new entrepreneurial businesses within the town of Haverhill and support expanding the town's tax base. We look forward to getting your input.

Questions

- (1) Do you have any questions about the goals of HEEC?
- (2) Tell us about your business – history, number of employees, current business climate.
- (3) What are the biggest challenges facing your business?
- (4) Some of the ideas HEEC is considering include a mentoring program for current business leaders and people interested in starting a business, creating a town business directory, and marketing vacant properties. What are your thoughts on these projects?
- (5) Would you be willing to be a mentor for someone interested in starting or expanding a business in Haverhill?
- (6) What activities could the HEEC do that would have the most impact?
- (7) How could the Town of Haverhill better support your business?
- (8) Do you have any other ideas or suggestions to help support and expand Haverhill businesses?
- (9) Are there other people/businesses you think we should interview?

Appendix 3: Current HEEC Membership

- Dennis Cunningham
- Kevin Shelton
- Jeff Stimson
- Scott Nichols
- Douglass Teschner
- Erik Volk (representing Cohase Chamber of Commerce)