

Town of Sykesville: Focus Group Findings

Greatest Asset	Challenges	Downtown	Warfield	Transportation and Bike/Ped	Parks	Other
Focus Group #1: August 18 @ 3:00 PM						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The residents and the sense of community. Participants emphasized the “can do” attitude, community spirit, and small-town feel. • The small-town charm with regional proximity to amenities (e.g., shopping, job markets, etc.) was noted. The Town was awarded “Coolest Small Town in America” in 2019 and “Best Main Street in America” in 2020. • Downtown Sykesville, including the walkable nature of the downtown, tremendous community events, and successful merchants are all assets. • Downtown Sykesville Connection (DSC) and its volunteers are a tremendous asset. The organization has revamped downtown over the course of ~10 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited parking in the downtown is a challenge. Participants expressed challenges with parking not only during large events, but during weekdays as well. • Active, alternate transportation modes are desired to improve and increase the safety of walking and biking. • Improving the sidewalk network is a strong desire. • The Carroll County real estate market currently only absorbs 20,000 sq. feet in commercial space per year. The Warfield developers contend the market presents a challenge for the full-build out of the Warfield project as proposed, which would have over 200,000 sf feet. • In addition, Eldersburg has an oversupply of big box commercial retail. There is limited demand for additional large retail uses, as it would compete with Eldersburg north of Sykesville. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Downtown Sykesville is the Town’s “crown jewel”. • Continuing the momentum of DSC and the improvements to downtown is important. It was noted 10 years ago, landlords needed to “plea” to attract businesses. Today, there is a waiting list of businesses that would like space on Main Street. • A parking solution is desired to support existing and future land uses and events. • Improving sidewalks and make safe walking and biking connections to downtown is desired. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants agreed Warfield is an important opportunity for the Town in terms of future growth. There is mutual desire for the project to come to fruition. • Potential ideas for Warfield included a community center or venue to offer activities for the Town’s youth as well as a four-seasons destination. • Participants likewise agreed there needs to be a better connection between Warfield and the downtown. In addition to walking/biking, a shuttle or train option was recommended, such as a Dotto transportation option. • Developers stated that Warfield is estimated to have a net fiscal impact for the Town and recommended that the increase in Town revenue could be utilized to reinvest in downtown’s infrastructure (e.g., parking garage) via debt service on a municipal bond issued by the Town. • The developers expressed desire to cultivate a better working relationship with the Town. Understanding the current market realities, the master plan will need to be reevaluated in terms of market viability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating new connections between downtown and Warfield and the residential neighborhoods were mentioned. The tunnel under Rt 32 provides a “huge” starting point for improving the connection. • County representatives noted there are residential lots in the southeast quadrant of the Rt 32 corridor and making a bike/ped connection would be beneficial. • County representatives expressed the potential for a trail linkage to Eldersburg (sewer easement was identified as a route but is no longer viable due to the military installation project and security perimeter issues). • The Rt 32 realignment was a significant improvement for Sykesville. • MD State Highway needs to address deficiencies along Main Street including drainage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aside from trail linkages and bike/ped connectivity, parks were not widely discussed. • Freedom Park is currently used for Sykesville Raiders football practices. Games are held on the fields by Fairhaven. It was noted practice fields are desired. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was recommended that the Town’s Zoning Ordinance needs to be modernized in terms of uses. For example, a laundromat is permitted downtown, but not a brewery. It was suggested the Town needs to be progressive and forward thinking on its land use policies. • In terms of housing, it was noted Sykesville has a competitive market with low vacancy rates and limited rental properties available. It was noted that there may be housing demand for smaller units catering to young professionals. • Providing more activities and amenities for children and youth was discussed. This relates to the community center; other ideas included a sports complex, multi-purpose fields, and a movie theatre.

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Focus Group #2: August 19 @ 9:00 AM						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Sykesville area has a rural character and small-town feel, which contributes to the Town's strong sense of community. It was noted, as a resident, you often cross paths with acquaintances downtown or even in Eldersburg while shopping. The Town's proximity to urban cores (Howard County and Baltimore) is a significant asset. Sykesville is family-friendly and offers a variety of events for children and families. The success of Sykesville's merchants is a significant asset. In addition to Town residents, the downtown and events draw visitors from Howard and Baltimore Counties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants agreed limited parking downtown is a significant challenge for residents and visitors alike. In addition to peak hours and events, one participant added parking on Sundays is problematic for St. Paul's United Methodist Church as the farmer's market also brings traffic Sunday mornings. There is a desire to see Town/police assistance with parking during peak times. In addition, it was noted resident parking takes parking spaces away from the church's congregation. Some suggested that parking is generally sufficient now, but at capacity, so any new growth must come with new parking solutions. Improving the sidewalk network is a strong desire. Participants indicated the current network is deteriorated and has missing linkages. There is also a desire for crosswalks. The Town's limited geographic footprint is a limitation for future growth of the downtown. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall, participants believe downtown is thriving and doing well. Aside from parking and connectivity, no other areas of need were identified. Office space is not a desired use for downtown. Participants indicated Warfield is a better location for office uses. Downtown events are a great tool to attract visitors who then patronize local businesses downtown. The Home and Farm representative indicated events are less beneficial for the business, which typically supplies larger goods that can't be easily transported. The farmers market and Shop Local Initiative are great examples of downtown programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants expressed support for the development of Warfield and for providing a connection to the downtown. The connectivity between Warfield and downtown Sykesville should be established to enhance walkability and alternative modes of transportation. Participants explained that Warfield could complement the Downtown Sykesville area by offering commercial and medical office space, and perhaps a grocery store. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific areas of need for improved sidewalk connections include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Downtown Schoolhouse Road Transportation improvements are desired on Schoolhouse Road and Oklahoma Avenue to improve sight distances. In addition, street-lighting and sidewalks are desired to improve the safety of walking, especially after dark (e.g., no houses and no lighting in the vicinity create public safety concerns). A stop sign at 2nd Avenue and Spout Hill Road is desired. Main Street, including the bridge over the South Branch Patapsco River, was the subject of a MD State Highway reconstruction project, but the status of the project is unclear. Expansion of the bridge to better accommodate pedestrians would be beneficial in the long-term. But the roadway/bridge closure would be a hardship on local merchants in the short-term. Bicyclists have become a more common sight, usually riding in the street. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In terms of areas of need from a parks and recreation standpoint, participants had no comments. It was noted that Sykesville would benefit from having a formal Town park department, rather than relying on Sykesville Parks and Recreation Committee (SPARC) volunteers to lead efforts on park maintenance and coordination. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A participant observed the DSC events are often oriented around alcoholic offerings, resulting in poor public behavior. Suggested more family-friendly events would be appropriate. Volunteers are always needed to assist with events and programing in Sykesville and can be a challenge to recruit. The Town's residential population is becoming more diverse. There is an opportunity to embrace and celebrate the Town's diversity. Limited engagement in the census is an issue that leads to incomplete data and understanding of the Town's demographics.

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Focus Group #3: August 19 @ 10:30 AM						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are excellent schools in the Sykesville area, on par with those in more urban areas, but Sykesville has the benefit of small-town charm and a rural character. • Sykesville has excelled at business engagement and coordination. The staff of DSC are excellent. • Community events help unite business owners and residents and leverage the camaraderie of shop owners. • The lack of chain restaurants and big box retailers is a refreshing aspect of Sykesville and a contributing factor to its charm and attractiveness to visitors. • The proximity to the region's metro areas is a strength, while maintaining the small-town feel (compared to Howard County or Westminster). Sykesville was named "coolest town". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parking in the downtown is a challenge that needs to be addressed to promote continued growth. Merchants hear that visitors have complaints. The vacant building along Sandusky Road was identified as a potential site for a structure, as participants indicated any structure would need to be located away from Main Street to maintain the small-town character and charm. It was also noted a formal parking study should also be considered to better quantify the need (e.g., is a structure warranted?). • The Town is land constrained, which limits the potential for future growth in the downtown. A participant suggested Town Hall could be relocated to Warfield to provide additional space along Main Street for retail uses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The downtown has been very successful in recent years. One participant observed that the Town, in 10 years, has transitioned from "antique to boutique". • While already strong, providing additional ways for residents and visitors to gather and stroll is desired. Closing Main Street is great for this purpose (e.g., happy hours on Fridays, etc.). • Upscale living and smaller unit sizes for young professionals and empty nesters are lacking. These demographics also tend to enjoy walkable locations so this type of residential near downtown is an opportunity. • New businesses, such as a brewery, should keep the focus on Main Street as a destination. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants agreed Warfield is an important opportunity for the Town in terms of future growth. There is mutual desire for the project to come to fruition. • Participants indicated that creating a connection between Warfield and downtown is important to ensure "both heartbeats" of the Town work together. A trolley was suggested. • Nexion Health was the first large development in Warfield and has seen great success but attracting additional companies to the site has been difficult. The Maryland County economic development representative, who has worked on Warfield for ~20 years, noted that Warfield's greatest challenge is not offering pad-ready sites/buildings. Companies looking to relocate or expand desire buildings that can be move-in ready in as little as 12 months. • It was noted that entertainment related uses may be an opportunity for Warfield. Sykesville is already a destination, providing a synergy for additional entertainment amenities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving sidewalks to promote walkability is desired. • Main Street, including the bridge over the South Branch Patapsco River, was the subject of a MD State Highway reconstruction project, but the status of the project is unclear. Expansion of the bridge to better accommodate pedestrians would be beneficial in the long-term. It was noted that the roadway/bridge closure would be a hardship on local merchants in the short-term. • Electric charging stations should be considered for downtown. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants indicated active recreation amenities are desired for the future. Ideas included trails for biking/walking, a river walk (mentioned several times), and active park amenities. • Gathering spaces were highlighted as desired both in downtown (maintaining and expanding what they have) and in Warfield (new gathering spaces). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In terms of housing, it was noted the current housing stock in the Town is largely single-family units typically occupied by families. There may be market demand for smaller market-rate luxury rentals (studio, 1-bedrooms, etc.) to attract young professionals and baby boomers. • The farmers market was noted as a good amenity for the Town. • The Apple Butter building was suggested as an ideal community space. • General visions for the future emphasized "building community" through relationships and connections.

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Focus Group #4: August 20 @ 12:00 PM (DSC/Merchant Focus)						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Town's location was cited by nearly every participant: the fact that Sykesville is a quaint small town (relaxing retreat) but within easy driving distance of regional amenities and metro areas, including employment centers. It was described as an "oasis". Valued amenities include the river, skateboard park, and the Piney Run Park/Reservoir. It was noted housing in Sykesville is more affordable than Howard County and taxes are lower. Sykesville remains a small-town with a personable connection among the residents/businesses. The Town also has a "vibe". There are excellent schools in the Sykesville area and the Town is a great and safe place to raise a family. The vibrancy of the downtown and community events is unparalleled. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The geographic constraints of the Town will require creativity to promote continued growth. It was noted downtown has had a 0% vacancy rate for 4-5 years. The Town's requirements for parking were described as outdated and needing modernization to reflect walkability and ridesharing. It was mentioned off-site parking with a trolley would be a potential opportunity. It was also noted that Sykesville has an abundance of free parking, which is "unheard of". <i>(Consultant note: Couldn't infer if that was being said as a good thing or perhaps opportunity for revenue).</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parking requirements impede new retail from opening; one participant suggested possibly reducing this requirement. Parking should be studied and addressed in the long-term (Note: <u>less emphasis</u> on it being a critical short-term issue than in the prior focus groups). Balancing growth with the small-town nature will be a challenge with future build-out. The desire is to maintain Sykesville's small-town feel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a desire to see continued momentum for downtown. The waterfront is a unique opportunity that should be prioritized. In this focus group, the Farm and Home business located in the downtown was described as no longer being the highest and best use of the leased land. Participants indicated that the downtown should be prioritized for retail. Office is not a desired use. Likewise, it was noted any retail/restaurant uses in Warfield would be a direct competitor. Sidewalks and connectivity should be improved. Main Street's narrow sidewalks do not feel safe for pedestrians. The Town-owned lot behind Becks on Sandusky Rd was noted several times as an opportunity that needs to be advanced. Some frustration was shared that the property is sitting vacant when downtown is out of capacity (0% vacancy for 4-5 years). A marketplace was suggested as a possible use. Town Hall, including the lawn, could be better utilized as a gathering location/communal space. There is a strong desire for merchants to be able to use Main Street as a pedestrian 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Warfield was characterized by several participants as a tremendous economic development opportunity for the Town that is forthcoming. Downtown representatives expressed support for the development, provided it is used for office and not retail/restaurant. Hotel and entertainment were also noted as desired uses. Biotech was noted as an industry of interest (leveraging Zeteo already located at Warfield). Workers are highly educated, have disposable income, and would be a welcomed addition. Warfield is not viewed as an extension of downtown but could be a compliment. Connectivity was generally supported. Improving communications about Warfield is an opportunity. For example, the current zoning limitations would be helpful to communicate so residents understand what can and cannot be developed. The Town should work with the Warfield developers to help move the project to fruition and engage the downtown stakeholders. Providing a connection between Raincliffe and Warfield is desired. Employment uses at Warfield would support downtown retail and provide more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was noted wayfinding signage on Route 32 and on Main Street is needed to help entice locals to travel to Downtown Sykesville. The river bridge should be improved. Currently, it's a safety concern for individuals and families trying to cross to the skateboard park. Walking downtown is unsafe due to poor pedestrian accommodations. The state is a major stakeholder and needs to be engaged to move a project forward (former streetscape project). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Town's park and proximity to state parks and the reservoir were noted as treasures. A sidewalk connection between the skateboard park and the river bridge is needed. Outdoor public space activities require extensive permitting. Streamlined policies to allow open streets and such events would support more gatherings. <i>(Consultant note: unclear whether this refers to park spaces as well as street spaces).</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize municipal broadband access and expand high speed internet. Residents, in general, are unaware where to go for Town information. Low voter turnout and challenges with volunteerism where also noted as concerns. Communication between the Town and residents could be improved (a promotion plan would be advantageous). The leased parcel on the Howard County side extends up along the river and is an asset that should be explored. The downtown stakeholders desire more rooftops in the Town. <i>(Consultant note: Both adding residential downtown and making rooftop spaces usable were discussed).</i> The Town is incorporated and can control its own planning policies and laws, which is a strength.

		<p>only plaza on a regular basis (happy hour, music festivals, etc.). COVID-19 has provided a “silver lining” in that it’s opened conversations with MD State Highway to facilitate this. The Town should be proactive in continuing this dialogue.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creative uses and land use policies should aim to use every space in downtown and pursue adaptive reuse where possible.• Rooftops were specified as an example of available space to use by making occupiable rooftops.	<p>daytime/weekday customers. Current commuting trends mean that most people leave Sykesville during the workday.</p>			
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Focus Group #5: August 20 @ 12:00 PM						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sykesville’s greatest asset is its small-town feel which attracts visitors and tourists. The atmosphere of the Town is attractive to families and contributes to the low rate of vacancy in the Town’s residential areas. • The Town is within proximity of Baltimore and Washington D.C. which allows residents to commute to work in these larger cities. It also allows companies in Sykesville to draw from a greater talent pool. • Sykesville’s unique events are well planned and attract tourists and revenue to the Town. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was noted the county has a net outflow in terms of employment. Warfield would be an excellent place to develop more local employment opportunities. • For businesses that outgrow downtown, Warfield becomes a natural place to relocate and expand. • Luxury apartments would fill a market demand for young professionals who want to live/work in a community (more affordable than the metro areas). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Downtown Sykesville would benefit from additional restaurants and retail businesses, as well as luxury apartments. • There is a gap in grab-and-go restaurants as well as restaurant diversity in Sykesville’s Downtown (e.g., deli, quick bite to eat, and different cuisines). These gaps could be supplemented by food trucks, or possibly the development of multiple restaurants at the Town-owned Sandosky property. • In terms of a destination and attraction, restaurants and bars are critical. Restaurants and bars attract visitors/patrons, who then stroll to visit other merchants. Building out the downtown’s eating establishments should be a priority focus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warfield has ample space for development, and the Town could benefit from the construction of new luxury apartments at Warfield. • The disconnect between Warfield and downtown should be bridged intentionally. Workers in Warfield have a desire to walk to Main Street but are unable to do so due to the long distance separating them and the lack of sidewalk connections. Golf carts were suggested as one alternative to transportation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parking is a perceived issue in Sykesville. It was noted that during the week it is very easy to find parking along the street. • It was noted the Town should limit its involvement with parking (removing parking requirements) and allow the private sector to address it on its own. • Wayfinding signage would be one simple way to improve a visitor’s ability to find parking. • Sidewalk improvements would be helpful. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not discussed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redevelopment of the riverfront should not be a short or mid-term priority. There are many initiatives/projects that should be tackled first. • Though Sykesville’s status as a historic town is important to many, a fresher look is needed (e.g., paint colors). • It was suggested that the design guidelines/ requirements for historic preservation be relooked at to ease the burden of meeting small nuances of historic building character (e.g., specific window placement, etc.). The current process hinders investment and development. However, design guidelines are important for the consistency/integrity of the Town’s look and feel.