

**City of New Castle Delaware
City Council Special Meeting
201 Delaware Street – New Castle
Wednesday, May 16, 2018 – 6:30 p.m.**

City of New Castle Economic Development/Tourism Plan Consultant Report

Roll Call: 6:30 pm

Councilperson Valarie W. Leary

Council President Linda Ratchford

Councilperson Michael M. Platt

Councilperson John A. Di Mondì

Councilperson Michael J. Quaranta (6:34 pm)

Also Present:

Janet Carlin, City Treasurer

William Barthel, City Administrator

Power Point Presentation has been attached to the meeting minutes that was given by Ms. Eliason.

Council President Linda Ratchford introduced Louise Eliason, with whom the city contracted to prepare a marketing and economic development plan, to be presented at this meeting.

Ms. Eliason referred to a 40-page document that had been provided to attendees, and presented the following:

The purpose of the plan being presented is to come up with a near-term plan of action, as well as a long-term plan for future economic development.

The stated goal of the presentation is to raise awareness in the city, and to attract investment, via visitors to the city who enjoy their visits to the extent that they choose to return and invest in businesses, residences, and/or other community investment.

This process begins with attracting people who are “like-minded,” i.e. those who like history, and appreciate the environment of New Castle. There are two different environments that are useful for this purpose. One is the image of historic downtown New Castle. The other is the “green” environment, including the trails, farms, parks, river, etc.

These are considered the main attractors to visitors who would be most likely to choose to stay in New Castle, and potentially open businesses and/or buy homes. These are who Ms. Eliason is referring to as “investors.”

Councilperson Di Mondì mentioned that the city is not set up to accept visitors. There is no variety of bed and breakfasts, restaurants, etc.

Ms. Eliason responded that a boutique inn is recommended for this reason, and this will be discussed in more detail later in the presentation.

Bringing in more tall ships will attract visitors with an interest in maritime history.

The upcoming bike trail will bring people to the city, as well.

New Castle is a community, in that there is no major employer in the city that brings in potential customers to downtown merchants. Therefore, visitors are needed to support those merchants.

A steering committee should be created to discuss long-term plans for the city, such as a potential anchor employer, etc. However, near-term economic growth is reliant on visitors to the city.

Core strengths in New Castle, to be used to attract visitors, are the history of the city, the beautiful historic structures downtown, and the fact that New Castle is a green town. These include the bike trails, the byways, green spaces, museums. These are unique to New Castle, creating a competitive advantage in attracting tourism dollars.

According to a report from the State of Delaware, citizens' taxes would increase by \$1400 per year, if it weren't for the dollars brought into the economy by tourism. The provided 40-page document includes additional statistics and data related to how tourism boosts the economy.

The State of Delaware is in the midst of a large tourism campaign, with a large budget, and it is in the best interests of New Castle to dovetail on that program, narrowing the plan down to what is right for New Castle.

Current marketing strategy is getting away from attracting customers by age and gender, and moving toward attracting by preferences. Preferences can be learned by tracking website page views.

Using the example of the Greater Wilmington Visitors Bureau's website, Ms. Eliason described how visitor packages can be created, to provide to the target demographic. One possibility would be targeting empty nester couples who are looking for dining, shopping, and historic areas.

Other suggested target groups might be those in higher education, professionals, and the legal community. This area is the center of democracy, demonstrated by touring the local courthouse, and would be an attractive destination to that demographic. Another target group might be those interested in historic homes, including potentially an international audience.

The local pier is a great attraction. The first effort of Ms. Eliason's company would be to maximize the marketing potential of that pier by bringing in more ships and tourism.

To get an idea of the likelihood of being able to bring more tall ships to the area, letters were sent to four of the tall ships that would be traveling to Philadelphia, asking whether they might consider coming to New Castle. Three responded no, one responded maybe.

The logistics of what it would take for the pier to be able to accommodate a ship with the size and dimensions of the one "maybe" ship were studied, and such a project is doable.

The coming Markell Trail, scheduled to open July 14, will be another source of visitors to New Castle. The desired visitor demographic from the bike trail can be targeted, rather than waiting to see who comes into the city via the trail.

Studies show that biking trails such as the Markell Trail are considered an amenity, and can increase property values in the area. A study from Minnesota showed property values increasing 148%.

Creation of a bike trail committee, comprised partly of people familiar with bicycling, as well as members of the target tourism audience, was suggested.

Another suggested committee to be created would be the economic development and tourism steering committee mentioned earlier, to discuss the future of the city. This would include industry experts and affected landowners. This committee would have sub-committees to address the bike trail, another for the pier, another for the marketing plan.

The process that Kennett Square went through, to become a major tourist destination, was given as an example of the process that New Castle might consider. They started with a steering committee like the one referred to early, that consisted of actual stakeholders. They created a one-year comprehensive plan, which included Kennett Square. This is the approach that New Castle should consider.

Start with basic decisions such as the target visitor demographic, and the priorities of the city. Then, bring in external stakeholders, once the general direction has been determined. Ms. Eliason is available to help with this process, as well as help select a firm to work with, that has the expertise needed, such as engineering and design.

Returning to the earlier example of Kennett, they have a staff devoted to economic development, with a half a million dollar budget. This is the type of thing that New Castle should consider in the future.

In the shorter term, Ms. Eliason would like to start work on bringing in some tall ships. She would also like to begin marketing New Castle to the legal community in Wilmington, including working to have them schedule their annual company events in New Castle.

The bike trail would be one of the attractions heavily marketed. The intent would be to appeal to professionals as a potential home and/or business base.

Ms. Eliason referred to a comprehensive five-year plan that is included in the handout, under Appendix A.

Council President Ratchford requested that Ms. Eliason explain her earlier comment that doing nothing is a decision.

Referring to a historic preservationist who had previously asked her about New Castle, Ms. Eliason explained that he had pointed out to her that properties decay, and people lose interest. Therefore, putting off making a decision about the direction of the city is, in fact, making a decision to allow the available resources to decay.

A concerted effort needs to be made, to convince outsiders that New Castle is a friendly community, where visitors and newcomers are welcome and appreciated. The resulting increased revenue will be a return on the investments that have already been made in, for example, the pier.

Council President Ratchford asked that Ms. Eliason expound on her thoughts about the city's web presence.

Ms. Eliason stated that she hopes to be able to provide annual updates to the city on progress related to this project.

For the website visitor tracking statistics to be useful, a more visitor-friendly city website is needed, that would have visitor-targeted pages, separate from the Community pages. This Visitor section would include links to related sites that potential visitors might be interested in viewing. The speed and maneuverability of the site is also important, to keep viewers interested.

Council President Ratchford asked how Ms. Eliason envisions her planning working together with the city's current branding project, as well as the fact that New Castle is a national park, with a visitor's center.

Ms. Eliason responded that she would like to be the person who would be reaching out to those and other areas, bringing them all together, to jointly attract visitors to the website and the city. Currently each of those elements works toward the same purpose, but in isolation. The city website would help visitors find those websites.

Current and future signage needs to be reviewed, with the standpoint of the visitor kept in mind.

Councilperson Platt expressed that New Castle does not have the water frontage that other visitor-attracting communities have, such as Kennett Square. Ms. Eliason responded that it is Kennett Square's process that she is holding up as an example, not their actual attractions.

Councilperson Platt pointed out the negative connotation that New Castle County has, and how that impacts peoples' opinions of the city of New Castle. Ms. Eliason's plan to counter that is to put positive stories about the city online, and have them replace the negative stories, in web search results. These would include positive publicity pieces that Ms. Eliason would contribute.

Councilperson Leary pointed out that there are existing resources in the city that could be used, so that new building would not necessarily have to be the only options for such things as new restaurants and boutique hotels. Ms. Eliason agreed that this is something that the steering committee should discuss.

Ms. Eliason had been able to get a hold of the national park people, and learned that they are in the process of rebranding, and they are using a marketing campaign that is directed at the baby boomer generation. This includes historic trail tours that include communities like the city of New Castle. The courthouse has experienced an increase in visitors, many of whom are driven there by the national parks passport program.

Councilperson Quaranta mentioned the importance of the city government being involved in tourism efforts, as well as solid communication between all affected parties. He also expressed

his preference that the focus be less on becoming a larger community, and more on staying a vibrant, thriving community of basically its current size, with a daily influx of visitors, to sustain it.

His view is directed toward ensuring that all groups and entities that are impacted by tourism and visitors work together, maintaining communication.

Ms. Eliason used the example of another small community that was able to take advantage of a large tall ship event that was happening nearby, even though it was not taking place in their community.

Councilperson Quaranta spoke about the importance of bringing investors into the community, to support and accommodate the changing demographic of the city.

Council President Ratchford agreed that reaching out to educational institutions, to generate interest in visiting New Castle, is a good idea. She also stated that she had spoken to employers both in and outside of the city, and had been told that New Castle is touted as an enticement to potential employees.

Ms. Eliason suggested that those people should be considered stakeholders in this project.

She reiterated that an important step is getting outsiders to visit New Castle, in the first place.

Council President Ratchford advised that there was much for the city to consider, and thanked Ms. Eliason for the presentation. She also stated that the reference document will be available on the city's web page.

Adjournment motion carried at 7:48 pm

Respectfully submitted,

Brian G. Whitaker

Clerk of the City of New Castle, Delaware