

Cold Spring Strategic Planning Session 2021

Executive Summary

A Strategic Planning Session occurred with the support of the City of Cold Spring Economic Development Authority, the Cold Spring Area Chamber of Commerce, staff from the ROCORI School District, local businesses owners, local organization leaders, and community members representing community groups. The attendees present at this discussion were identified by the Joint Action Committee. The goals of the session were to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats through a SWOT Analysis, strategize ways to maximize strengths to overcome weaknesses and threats, and collaborate to brainstorm and gather ideas on actionable items to improve the area.

A variety of insights were shared during the session. Common themes emerged during discussions as issues that attendees felt were important and should be prioritized by the City of Cold Spring and within the community. During the SWOT Analysis, the group identified community strengths in the areas of residents, the workforce, public spaces and natural amenities, and labor and educational opportunities. The group also recognized weaknesses that highlighted workforce and resident needs, community collaboration, and limits to business expansion. Based on the strengths, weaknesses, community characteristics, and geographic locations, threats to community wellbeing and economic growth were also identified. Based on the strengths and weaknesses identified, some opportunities regarding ways in which the Cold Spring area can address its weaknesses and minimize threats included increasing collaboration between community groups, incorporating workforce needs into future plans for the City of Cold Spring, and engaging in community projects that will make Cold Spring a destination city.

The brainstorming session portion of this event also gathered information in the areas of economic development, tourism, community, wellness, livability. Ideas in these categories highlighted projects that the community could engage in to promote economic growth by attracting new businesses, addressing workforce development needs, increasing community development projects and community engagement to become an inclusive community that stands out as a place where people want to live.

These results suggest that the Joint Action Committee, the Cold Spring Economic Development Authority, and the City of Cold Spring should work to address the community weaknesses and towards the opportunities identified by this analysis. The discussions and ideas will contribute to the priorities of the Joint Action Committee. Based on the themes of the SWOT Analysis discussion and the brainstorming session ideas, the Joint Action Committee will use this information to guide the projects they lead in the community.

Introduction

On April 27th, 2021, approximately 18 individuals from the City of Cold Spring, the Cold Spring Economic Development Authority, the Cold Spring Area Chamber of Commerce, the ROCORI School District, small business owners, representatives of community organizations, and other community members gathered to participate in a Strategic Planning Session for the Cold Spring community. Chris Giesen with the Community and Economic Development Associates facilitated this event and the Joint Action Committee planned and organized the event. The Planning Session facilitated discussion among the attendees, promoted the brainstorming of ideas to improve the City of Cold Spring and the surrounding community.

SWOT Analysis

The facilitated SWOT Analysis was conducted with the full group. This discussion identified the community strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the current state of the City of Cold Spring and the surrounding community. Attendees were prompted to answer questions relating to what they think the Cold Spring community does well and how it could improve. Feedback was given openly and discussion was built off of other attendees' comments, ideas, and suggestions.

Strengths

The group identified community strengths in the following categories: schools, business community and local workforce, attributes of community members, amenities, and public access to natural features in the area. These strengths show the following themes:

1. Residents and workers are the foundation of the Cold Spring community
2. Public amenities and proximity to unique geographic features make the area a favorable place to live
3. Access to workforce and educational opportunities contributes to community growth

The group highlighted the fact that finding ways to continue to build on and use current strengths of the city will be vital to overcoming community challenges, weaknesses, and threats.

Many strengths identified by the group pertained to community members and the local workforce reflecting a theme of residents and workers being an asset to the Cold Spring community. The character attributes of residents and those who work in the city were recognized as community strengths. Having a sense of community pride, hospitable residents, and the open mindedness of residents in all ROCORI cities were attributes of community members that make people want to live in the Cold Spring area. The strong work ethic of the local workforce and the ease of making connections within the community were identified as benefits.

Cold Spring's close proximity to natural amenities and public infrastructure was an overarching theme as these spaces make people want to live in the Cold Spring area. The group shared that city parks, the splash pad, close proximity to the lakes, and the ROCORI Trail were all unique features that people visit in the area. Access to highways surrounding the city was also identified as a strength as this increases access to work and leisure opportunities as well as access to resources in neighboring cities.

Community growth attributable to workforce and educational opportunities was a theme of the community strengths discussion. The high quality education provided by the ROCORI Schools and opportunities through ROCORI Community Education were identified as major strengths of the community. The increase in local business development of large and small employers was another community strength. The group shared that this increase in business development is partially attributable to the dedication and strong work ethic of the local workforce and city incentives that create opportunities for business startups or expansions.

Weaknesses

Community weaknesses identified include challenges that relate to community collaboration and development, the results of unmet community needs, and issues that inhibit building a vibrant community. Themes from the discussion on weaknesses include the following items.

1. A lack of community collaboration prevents opportunities across communities
2. Unmet needs threaten community wellbeing and connectedness
3. A lack of affordable and diverse housing options limits opportunities of the local workforce
4. Challenges to expansion of businesses and the city inhibits development and economic growth

During the discussion, the group shared ways to address some of these weaknesses that are described in the Opportunity section.

A lack of community collaboration within the City of Cold Spring and between the City of Cold Spring and neighboring cities was a theme of the discussion. It was identified that increased collaboration and unification between the cities of Rockville, Cold Spring, and Richmond could maximize opportunities and improvements in all of the cities. The idea that an improvement in one city will benefit neighboring communities as well was shared in the discussion. Increased collaboration between different stakeholders in the Cold Spring community and greater community engagement were also identified as ways to better address community needs. Taking advantage of opportunities to grow and address community needs collectively with different stakeholders will have a positive impact.

Other weaknesses identified related to the idea that unmet needs of specific populations in Cold Spring can harm community wellbeing. A lack of a community and city response to the needs of the growing senior population was emphasized in the discussion. Many seniors in Cold Spring lack opportunities to engage with other community members and programs that allow them to continue to receive services at home. A lack of public transportation options to the St. Cloud area was also mentioned as community weakness.

A variety of issues related to the lack of available housing options and housing affordability for residents were identified as a community weakness. These local housing issues were a concern of participants because they affect the needs of the workforce and the City of Cold Spring's ability to grow. A lack of more affordable housing options combined with a lack of diverse housing types including multi-family residential options and options beyond single family homes, makes living in the City of Cold Spring difficult for those who work in the area. These issues could discourage people from working in the area.

Factors that make it difficult for the City of Cold Spring to expand and attract businesses reflect a theme of challenges that inhibit development and economic growth in the area. A lack of funding for local businesses to improve the exterior of their buildings or complete repairs was mentioned as a weakness to revitalizing Cold Spring's downtown to encourage further development. Local infrastructure including old roads was mentioned as a weakness. Another factor preventing further business development included a lack of available land within the limits of the City of Cold Spring. This issue limits opportunities for the City of Cold Spring to encourage and incentivize new development. Overpriced land for sale in the area was identified as a inhibitor to local business development as startup businesses and employers looking to expand or develop in the area may not be able to afford the high prices for land.

Threats

The threats to the Cold Spring community by external forces identified were related to community development of larger cities, social characteristics that challenge community wellbeing, the community's ability to adapt to changes in population trends, and things that have exacerbated current needs of those living in Cold Spring. The following three themes encompass the threats identified:

1. Proximity to St. Cloud threatens the Cold Spring's ability to attract and maintain the local workforce
2. The Cold Spring community's priority to adapt to changing demographics
3. Social isolation harms community wellbeing

Although external threats to the Cold Spring community are often more difficult to control, the group took these themes into account when considering opportunities.

The City of Cold Spring's close proximity to St. Cloud was identified as a threat because the group felt St. Cloud is a competitor and has more of an ability and opportunities to meet the needs of the workforce. Affordable and available housing options was one of the workforce needs identified in the discussion. Business competition and lower prices for goods were also identified as threats of larger cities to Cold Spring area businesses. Large cities were also identified as a threat to filling job vacancies and attracting workers to the area. The discussion highlighted the issue of people potentially preferring to live and work in other communities if other cities can better meet the current workforce needs that exist in the Cold Spring area. This threatens local business and economic development in the City of Cold Spring.

The changing demographics of the City of Cold Spring and surrounding communities was identified as something to which the community and City of Cold Spring will need to adapt or risk losing a younger and working age demographic. Some changes in population trends in this discussion included a declining birth rate, an increase in those who cannot find or access housing, daycare, or other needs in the area, and the increase in the population over the age of 85 the area will see in the upcoming years. It was identified that the Cold Spring community will need to be able to support and address the needs of the growing populations in the area including immigrant populations. The negative views of increasing housing options available to lower-income individuals and families was also identified as a threat to the communities ability to address the growing need for people of all income levels who work in the Cold Spring community.

The issue of social isolation was also identified as a threat to community connectedness and mental health. Influenced by the pandemic, group members who worked with the 85+ population and in areas of social support discussed the potential risks of not addressing this issue. The potential for gun violence was mentioned as a related community threat that increases with social isolation and unaddressed mental health issues. Adverse effects to mental and physical health of the aging population and young people due to a lack of community connectedness or opportunities for engagement was identified.

Opportunities

Based on the strengths and weaknesses identified in the SWOT Analysis, the following themes were identified in the area of opportunities for overcoming weaknesses and threats.

1. Community stakeholders can increase collaboration with surrounding communities and better engage local populations to improve the community
2. Start conversations around local workforce needs and adjust future City of Cold Spring plans to address these needs

3. Make tourism and community-oriented developments and opportunities for recreation to become a destination city

Finding ways to work collectively in order to address community issues was a theme in the discussion on opportunities. Finding ways to include and engage community members who are less involved or often left out of conversations was mentioned as an opportunity to prioritize building community connectedness to address needs. Increasing the occurrence of conversations between leaders and community members from each of the three ROCORI cities and having an open community meeting to address community weaknesses were also suggested. Acknowledging the changing demographics of the area, it was mentioned that the City of Cold Spring, ROCORI School District, and community stakeholders can work together to rethink how the community uses spaces for living and gathering to use resources more effectively.

Another theme reflected in the discussion was to take steps to start conversations around and plan, as a city, to address local workforce needs. Local workforce needs identified included increasing housing diversity, more affordable housing options, creating high-paying jobs, and increasing childcare options. Starting conversations among City of Cold Spring leaders regarding new comprehensive plans and working with neighboring communities to develop annexation plans were discussed as ways to prioritize these needs and address threats to development in the Cold Spring area. Group members also discussed the importance of sharing these issues in community settings to change any negative narratives surrounding more affordable housing options to support the workforce.

Becoming a “destination city” by creating public spaces to maximize development that promotes recreational activities and opportunities for people to connect was a theme regarding opportunities. The group felt that we should increase tourism-related opportunities with new projects and activities that allow the public to enjoy the local natural amenities. Community project suggestions to increase tourism to the area included a marina on the Sauk River in the City of Cold Spring, having more community events at Alexander Park, and starting a bike-sharing program. Increasing city-supported efforts to revitalize downtown Cold Spring and attract visitors to the area was also mentioned as a way to promote tourism and business development.

Brainstorming Session

The brainstorming session created small groups to discuss specific community topics and identify creative projects in each of the categories or address local needs. Insights and ideas were shared in small groups in the areas of economic development, tourism, community, wellness, livability. After the small group discussions, each group shared some ideas with the entire group. A notetaker from each group recorded

important insights from the small group discussion. The following were the main ideas shared during the small group discussions.

Economic Development (Marketing)

- **Land Use:** Develop more industrial space with space for workforce housing. It is also important to have shovel-ready properties in order to encourage development.
- **Downtown Development:** Develop a vision and plan for downtown development in the City of Cold Spring.
- **Business Incubator:** Explore the option of creating a nonprofit business incubator to support startups and businesses.

Tourism

- **Marina Project:** Develop a marina along the Sauk River in Cold Spring to attract people into town and let them access businesses from the river.
- **Recreation:** Have kayak and other watercraft rentals available in the City of Cold Spring along the river as a recreation opportunity. Design a disc golf course at a local park for school programs and public use. The ROCORI School District is currently working on the disc golf project. Have a bike rental program for the public to use bikes on the ROCORI trail.
- **Community Events:** Have music in the park events, movie night in the park events, vendors, crafters, and food trucks at Alexander Park. Planning a neighborhood block party could be another event to bring community members together. Community classes including yoga in the park or cooking demonstrations are also ways to use the park space to build community.

Community

- **Engagement:** Find ways to increase community involvement and engagement. In the past, there were community engagement opportunities, but some still do not engage or engagement decreases overtime. Find ways to gain and maintain interest. Also, find ways to engage with neighboring cities and townships to build strong relationships. This includes doing a better job of reaching out to populations that have been excluded from conversations in the past.

- **Technology:** Explore different technology options and how technology can be used to connect with the community. Look into an automatic text communication platform for the City of Cold Spring or see what other organizations are using.
- **Community Education Building Connections:** ROCORI Community Education has changed in the past five years to develop more relationships in the community. There is a large Hispanic community. They reach out and visit these groups in the community. It is important to continue to make connections with community groups. Reaching younger populations is also needed.

Wellness

- **Senior Community:** Start a community or school program to connect middle school and high school students with seniors. Find ways to start more programs to support seniors in their homes, keep seniors engaged in the community, and have opportunities for social interaction.
- **Community wellness:** Have programs for “cradle-to-grave” engagement in schools and with other community organizations. Research what other communities are doing to promote wellness for all ages.

Livability

- **Housing:** Increase more affordable housing options for the workforce. Diversify housing options by including multi-unit buildings. Developing more senior housing options or patio homes.

Conclusions

These discussions suggest that local businesses owners, organization leaders, and community members representing community groups want the Cold Spring area to continue to become a community with unique amenities, opportunities, and a strong sense of community that make people want to live and work here. Identified issues and SWOT Analysis themes show that supporting all people who live and work in the Cold Spring area needs to be a priority of community stakeholders. The group identified many needs of the local workforce, those of different age groups, those of different backgrounds, and those of different income levels. The discussion centered on the idea that the group wanted to find ways for the City of Cold Spring and community organizations to engage, connect, and support everyone. The group highlighted that collaboration within the City of Cold Spring between community stakeholders and between cities and townships in the ROCORI area is key to overcoming local

challenges and more effectively and efficiently addressing the needs of residents and workers.

This report will be available to the public on the City of Cold Spring website. The Joint Action Committee will also guide their priorities to engage in community projects that address some of the issues and ideas brought up in this Strategic Planning Session discussion.