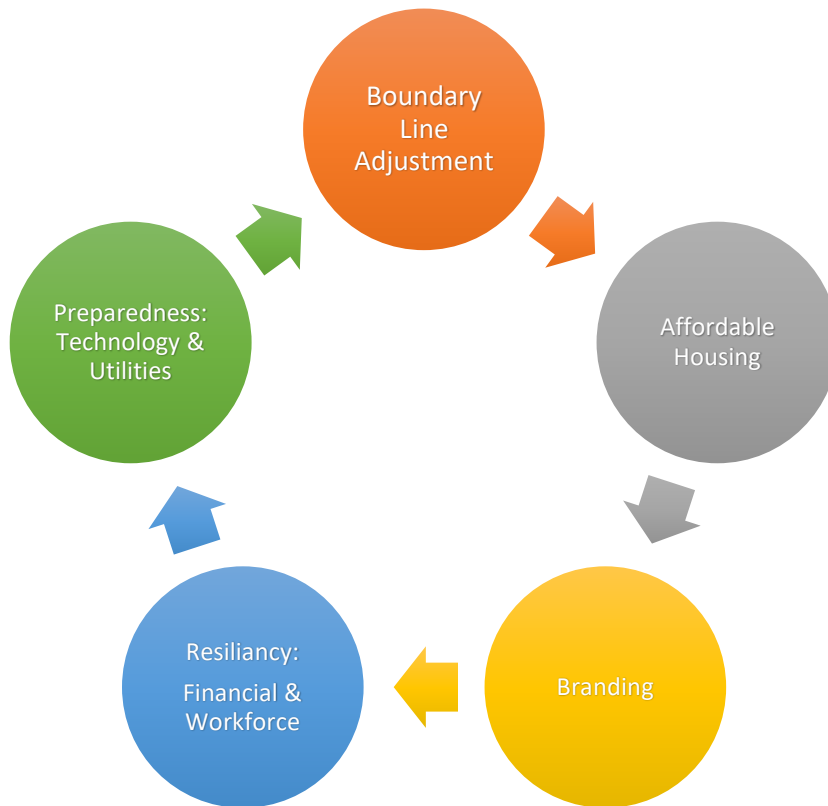




Warrenton Town Council Retreat - After Action Summary

1. Executive Summary

From the combination of reaffirmed existing priorities and the top-rated emerging priorities, all of which can be found rooted in the Comprehensive Plan, the following are by consensus the top priorities for 2023:



1. **Boundary Line Adjustment** – including overall relationship with the County and the process to finish this project
2. **Affordable Housing** – including how the County and Non-Governmental Organizations can assist in this challenge
3. **Branding** – Determining the next steps in this ongoing priority
4. **Resiliency & Preparedness** – Identifying key actions and initiatives that will protect and promote a successful future for Warrenton specifically in the areas of financial and workforce resources and also with attention to technology and utilities

Recommendations:

To build on the work of the September 24 retreat and to be well positioned for the FALL, WINTER & SPRING next steps, it would be advisable to review these priorities and:

1. Identify staff resources needed to execute the initiatives that will address these priorities
2. Identify the discretionary funding needed to pursue these priorities. This revenue will be in addition to the funding needed for general services and capital expenses in the budget.

It is also advisable to adopt project mapping software so initiatives can be reviewed for planning purposes and analyzed for milestone progress.

2. Overview

Retreat Preparation

During the weeks preceding the Warrenton Town Council planning session, 1-hour individual interviews were conducted to prepare for the retreat. The following people participated in a one-on-one format via video with Jane Dittmar from the Virginia Institute of Government:

Council Members (9)

H. E. Carter Neville – Mayor
James N. Hartman – Vice Mayor (Ward 4)
Renard Carlos – At Large Member
Sean Polster – At Large Member
Heather D. Sutphin – Ward 1
William Semple II – Ward 2
Brett A. Hamby – Ward 3
Jay Heroux – Ward 5 (newly appointed)
Kevin Carter – Ward 5 (recently resigned)

Professional Staff (10)

Chris Martino – Interim Town Manager
Tommy Cureton – Deputy Town Manager
Stephen Clough – Town Clerk
Kacey Braun- Human Capital Director
Frank Cassidy – Public Works & Utilities Director
Denise Harris – Planning Manager
Michael Kochis – Chief of Police
Stephanie Miller – Finance Director
Jonathan Stewart – IT Director
Kelly Koernig – Parks & Recreation (Acting) Director

The Retreat

On September 24, 2022, The Warrenton Town Council convened a day long retreat at the Warrenton Police station. Those present included:

Council Members (8)

H. E. Carter Neville – Mayor
James N. Hartman – Vice Mayor (Ward 4)
Renard Carlos – At Large Member
Sean Polster – At Large Member
Heather D. Sutphin – Ward 1
William Semple II – Ward 2
Brett A. Hamby – Ward 3
Jay Heroux – Ward 5

Professional Staff (4)

Chris Martino – Interim Town Manager
Tommy Cureton – Deputy Town Manager
Stephen Clough – Town Clerk
Stephen Bruck – IT Specialist

Facilitator

Jane Dittmar – Virginia Institute of Government

RETREAT AGENDA

- 1) Roles & Responsibilities of Elected Bodies and Professional Staff
- 2) Norms and Expectations among Council Members
- 3) Communication Strategies for Council Members
- 4) Challenges and Opportunities facing the Town
- 5) Existing Priorities found in the last Strategic and Comprehensive Plans
- 6) Emerging Priorities based on Challenges and Opportunities facing the Town
- 7) Next steps

1. Roles and Responsibilities

A. Summary

The science and philosophy behind highly performing elected bodies and their staff was discussed. Material from national and international organizations was reviewed.

Town Council

There was agreement that the Council is the policy maker and responsible for addressing the Town's long-term future by adopting the capital improvement and comprehensive plans, formulating annually a budget and setting the tax rate, enacting local ordinances and making land use determinations. The Council also understands its role hiring the Town Manager, Clerk and Attorney (or by securing outside legal services).

Town Manager & Staff

There was agreement the Town Manager is responsible for hiring, reviewing and retaining professional staff to execute Council policy and for ensuring high-level service delivery for Town residents. Discussion followed whether it was appropriate for individual Council members to work directly with staff instead of going through the Manager with constituent service requests. Utilizing the Town Manager to triage requests is the protocol described in the 2024 Warrenton Town Council Handbook. The handbook procedure was reaffirmed and Council members decided to review protocols on handling constituent service and other requests when the new Manager is on boarded.

Preferences for how Council Would Like Information

The group also discussed their preference in receiving briefings and recommendations from staff. There was consensus that an executive summary of findings and the recommendation of staff is a format that would be well received. There was not general consensus on how many options should be offered. Some members preferred just one recommendation with supporting justification. Others wanted a recommendation that included all the options considered by staff, and besides the supporting justification for the final recommendation, they wanted a brief explanation as to why the other options were rejected. One member did not like having three options to consider. There should be further discussion about how to present the staff recommendation found in their executive summaries.

2. Norms and Expectations

A. Summary

During individual Council members' interviews, the topic of norms of behavior among members came up frequently. This subject was added to the agenda. Besides stated norms found in the 2024 Warrenton Town Council Handbook, the Council discussed norms that were important to them individually and as a whole. Questions were posed such as:

- 1) How do we develop and find consensus on our norms?
- 2) How do we (shall we) evolve our norms?
- 3) How do we communicate our norms to new members?
- 4) What do we do if a norm is violated unintentionally?
- 5) What should we do if a member needs to violate a norm?

B. Individual interviews

During the individual interviews the following themes emerged:

- 1) **One Voice** – Members should bring policy and requests to the full Council so by majority, the Council can speak as “one voice”.
- 2) **No Surprises** – let your fellow members know in advance if they might be surprised by a motion or announcement
- 3) **General Decorum** – treat other members as you want to be treated
- 4) **The actions of a fellow member v. the member** – criticize actions or policies being promoted by a member, not the member themselves and keep language from becoming personal. Exercise care in social media posts and other group communication.
- 5) **My Ward – Our Town** – recognize and respect the ward members who represent a particular ward and all members should understand that the Council considers the good of the whole town.
- 6) **Horse trading votes** – when horse trading ward to ward, ensure that these votes are good for the whole town.
- 7) **Handling “breaches”** – reach out to understand a breach before reacting to what you assume was the motivation.

C. Exercise results

Members broke into four groups of two each to discuss norms and expectations. The following highlights illustrate the priorities of the members:

1) Boundaries

- a. **Ward boundaries** – those in wards request that they be notified if another member has town business to discuss or attend to in their ward. That said, some members didn't want the town to be too siloed by ward boundaries and wanted everyone to vote on behalf of the entire town.
- b. **Staff boundaries** – “don't put staff in the middle on issues”

2) Respect for each other

There was also good consensus around the showing of mutual respect by avoiding surprising a fellow member by talking outside of official meetings, coming prepared to meetings, accepting each other's differences and handling disagreements or concerns in private and preferably in person.

3) Handling Breaches

Discussion included the recommendation that any breach should be addressed carefully with respect on both sides.

3. Communication Strategies & Tools

Some time was devoted on tools and strategies for effective communication.

4. Existing Priorities

A. Summary

The Council spent time reviewing existing priorities found in the Comprehensive Plan “Plan Warrenton 2040” and in the findings of the last strategic plan held in 2019.

Plan Warrenton 2040 serves as the official document tying together community features with the overall vision for its future. It is broken into 7 areas of community policy and development:

- 1) Historic resources
- 2) Community facilities
- 3) Housing
- 4) Open space, parks & environment
- 5) Transportation and circulation
- 6) Economic and fiscal resilience
- 7) Land use and character district plan

B The strategic plan created in 2019 identified the following priorities:

- 1) **Boundary Adjustment- Facilities** – From the Community Facilities section of the Comprehensive Plan
- 2) **Branding- Who, What, Where** – From both the Historic Resources section and the Economic and Fiscal Resilience sections of the Comprehensive Plan
- 3) **Recreation- Quality of Life Activities** - From the Open Space Parks and Environment section of the Comprehensive Plan
- 4) **Historic District - Boundaries** – from both the Historic Resources and Land Use and Character District Plan
- 5) **Gateways** – from both Transportation and Circulation section and the Land Use and Character District section of the Comprehensive Plan and
- 6) **Inventory of Affordable Housing** – from the Housing section of the Comprehensive Plan

C **Group Exercise – reaffirming existing priorities**

Members broke into four groups of two each to discuss norms and responsibilities. The following highlights illustrate the priorities of the members. The top priorities identified by all four groups were:

1. Successful completion of the **boundary line adjustment** project
Top priority in two groups, number two priority in the other two groups
This priority continues to be consistent with both the Comprehensive Plan, found in the Community Facilities section, and the 2019 Council Retreat findings.
2. Forward movement on addressing **the affordable housing shortage**
Top priority in one group, Second priority in one group, third priority in two groups
This priority continues to be consistent with both the Comprehensive Plan found in the Housing section and the 2019 Council Retreat findings.
3. Continue the **branding** initiative for the town
Second priority in one group, third priority in one group, forth priority in one group and fifth priority in one group. This priority continues to be consistent with both the Comprehensive Plan, found in the Historic Resources section and the Economic and Fiscal Resilience section, and the 2019 Council Retreat findings.
4. Honorable mentions were recorded for:
 - a) Recreation (mentioned twice)
 - b) Historic resources (mentioned twice)
 - c) Transportation, including walkability (mentioned twice)
 - d) Economic Development (mentioned once)

5. Emerging Priorities

A. Summary

The Council was asked to consider emerging priorities that may not have been on the minds of council members when they (or if they) participated in the 2019 retreat.

B. Findings from the Interviews

The results of individual interviews were shared with the Council. The main themes centered around:

- 1) Resources – Protecting and growing the Town’s resilience by enhancing revenue streams and retaining and attracting top professional staff
- 2) Infrastructure - Water/Sewer & Technology – improving water and sewer capacity and procuring and training in technology for future resident service and general government efficiency. The need for project management software was frequently addressed in interviews.
- 3) Partner projects with Fauquier County – further developing and maintaining a close relationship with Fauquier County. This was raised regarding the boundary line adjustment project and also the possibility of jointly developing affordable housing at the boundary on either side of the Town limits.
- 4) Cultural shift – there is an awareness that the town is evolving from “Old Warrenton” to “New Warrenton” such that Council needs to determine what to preserve and what to stay out in front of.

C. Insights from the Virginia Institute of Government (VIG)

Generic challenges identified by (VIG) for local governments in the Commonwealth were briefly reviewed:

- 1) Local governments are increasingly asked to do more with less
- 2) Outside of pandemic one-time funding, federal and state support is declining
- 3) New technology continues to revolutionize communication and service deployment
- 4) Citizens are demanding a more responsive government
- 5) Conflict is erupting in the public square

D. Emerging Priorities – Exercise

Members broke into four groups of two each to discuss emerging priorities. The following highlights illustrate the priorities of the members

There were a number of emerging priorities the Council considered. The two major emerging priorities centered on **resiliency and workforce**.

1) Resiliency came in as number one emerging priority. It was listed number one for three groups and one of the three groups listed it twice. Descriptors for resiliency included:

- a) “financial”
- b) “preparedness”, and
- c) “preparedness for change”.

2) Workforce, arguably a subcategory of resiliency, was elevated to its own priority. It was listed as the number two issue for two groups and the number three issue for two groups. Descriptors included

- a) “hiring Town Manager”
- b) “employee retention”
- c) “employee recruitment and retention”, and
- d) “protecting our workforce”

3) Honorable mentions were recorded for:

- a) Representing town demographics; honoring diversity (mentioned twice)
- b) Maintaining high level of trust with residents (mentioned once)
- c) Maintaining the qualities of Warrenton that make it distinctive (mentioned once)
- d) Preparing for the future embracing change (mentioned once)
- e) Preparing for climate change (mentioned once)

6. Next Steps

There are several events in the near future that are significant to Council working through these priorities. They are:

1. FALL: Utilizing remaining work session(s) in 2022 to review the cost, action steps and timing of identified priorities for 2023. Also test the formats for explaining recommendations in executive summaries to determine which style suits the Council.
2. FALL: The November 2022 election will identify the several new members who will join the Council effective January 2023. Besides other materials, new member orientation can include a discussion of norms and expectations with other remaining members of the Council.
3. FALL: Communication with the search firm regarding the qualities the Council wants in their next Manager.
4. FALL: Staff preparation of the draft budget. To do this there will need to be clear direction from the Council on what priorities will be "slow walked" and which priorities should command the most discretionary resources in the next budget cycle.
5. WINTER: The on boarding of new Council members
6. WINTER: Preparation for the budget retreat where the Council will assess the expense side of general services, capital investment and whether there is sufficient resource to move ahead on their priority initiatives with the existing tax rate.
7. SPRING: The on boarding of the new Town Manager.

Prepared by:

Jane Dittmar

Virginia Institute of Government

dittmarjane@gmail.com