

All Aboard for Downtown Essex Junction Public Forum

Summary

We had a great turnout of 120 people at the All Aboard for Downtown Essex Junction forum. Participants included new residents, longtime residents, youth, several property owners, at least 11 business owners, and 11 public officials. It is clear that the community is energized and ready to work to revitalize RR Ave and Main Street.

Forum participants deliberated about a range of strategies for revitalizing the area. Participants acknowledged that many of the strategies are interrelated and all of them are important. Even so, three very clear next steps emerge.

- Create an Event Series
- Renovate the train station
- Add Parks & Green space

Create Event Series

“Do things that can happen quickly like a farmers market or outdoor art show.”

The event series is the top idea in the small group discussions, during the large group voting and in responses to the online follow-up survey. There is a sense that getting people on the street is a highly desirable way to build community and eventually attract business. There is particularly high interest in a farmers market and a group is already meeting to begin planning this. Many of the event ideas are already happening (Block Party, Tree Lighting) and others, with a few volunteers, will be easy to accomplish.

Add Parks & Green Space

“Flowers, planters, softening, greening.”

Interest in increasing green space seems closely linked with the idea of making the area pedestrian friendly, and with the overall importance of significantly improving the aesthetics of this part of town. The interest in adding green space also appears to be linked with creating spaces for people to gather and the idea of adding benches and outdoor tables is suggested by multiple groups. Specific suggestions for adding green space include flowers, window boxes, hanging baskets and containers.

Renovate the Train Station

“Renovate the train station and a few blighted spots and everything else will improve.”

There is strong interest in renovating the train station despite a very discouraging comment towards the beginning of the forum about the challenges of doing so. One group suggests renovating the exterior to make it “look like a historic train station.” Like the green space strategy, this strategy also seems linked to the idea that improving the aesthetics of this part of town will be an important catalyst for increased community and business activity.

Here is what some participants had to say

“I was so encouraged by the turnout and enthusiastic participation of everyone, from early teens to senior citizens”

“The community energy was inspiring”

“... can't wait to help”

Here is a look at additional strategies that had significant support.

Bring Restaurants and shops to the area

“End goal is to have restaurants and shops.”

There seems to be a strong consensus that community members would like to see more shops and restaurants in this part of town, and in the small group discussions and the follow up survey this strategy has significant support. During the large group voting it was sixth on the list. Some people raise the concern that we may not have much control over *“whether shops and restaurants will come, even if [we] want that.”* Others believe this will be accomplished as an outcome of implementing other revitalization strategies.

Marketing Essex Junction

There is significant interest in marketing efforts. Getting the word out about what is available in EJ and providing good signs, maps, etc. to help people find businesses is listed as a top priority in three of the small group discussions and came in as the 4th top priority during the large group voting (though it receives significantly less support on the follow-up survey).

Parking, Pedestrians & Traffic Management

Parking came up frequently in the small group discussions as did the desire to improve traffic flow and create better conditions for pedestrians. It came in fifth out of 13 possible priorities during the large group voting.

Update Zoning

There is an interest in the use of zoning and ordinances to “deal with the burned out building” and “prohibit eyesores in downtown.” This fits strongly with the recurring theme of improving the appearance of this part of town in order to set the stage for revitalization.

Ranking of Strategies

Ranking	Large Group Vote	Discussion Groups	Follow-up Survey
1	Event Series	Event Series	Event Series
2	Parks & Green Space	Renovate Train Station	Renovate Train Station
3	Renovate Train Station	Parks & Green Space Restaurants & Shops	Parks & Green Space Restaurants & Shops
4	Marketing EJ	Update Zoning	Parking, Pedestrians & Traffic
5	Parking, Pedestrians & Traffic	Marketing EJ	Marketing EJ
6	Restaurants & Shops	Transition to Housing	Update Zoning Multi-model transportation hub
7	Update Zoning		Arts
8	Support EJ businesses		Transition to housing
9	Multi model Transportation Center		Support EJ businesses
10	Transition to Housing/offices		
11	Arts		
12	Signage		

*Prepared for the RR Ave Revitalization Project by Susan McCormack
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