

I met this afternoon with Marc Verneil, the Town Manager of Blacksburg, to discuss some town government issues and potential projects related to them. Mark has graciously agreed to help out how ever he can and to help make all necessary introductions where necessary. Below are eleven ideas he came up with. Some of them specify a contact person. Do not contact anybody yet. If you are interested in an area, we will let Mark know and he will get the process rolling. For a few of the projects, I have written that "the town manager thinks this one could be very useful to the town." These are the projects Mark can see a real potential for real-life use of your findings. This is not to dismiss the others as he is personally just as interested in all of them, it's just that he knows a couple of them will have the potential to make a more immediate impact.

I know a few of you already have project ideas or are involved in other projects that you might be able to use. That's fine and we will discuss in our individual meeting. Please come to the meeting with an idea of what you want to do.

Police Staffing

While the town believes they are out ahead of other comparable localities when it comes to police staffing levels, they would like to be able to validate this belief. Ideas include comparing staffing levels per type in comparison to similar towns/cities or maybe determining if there is a relationship between crime rates and staffing levels or maybe population and staffing levels (or both) and determining, given these relationships, if Blacksburg is better or worse in comparison. If you choose to work on this one you will have the opportunity to be in contact with the Blacksburg Chief of Police, Kim Krannis, a CPAP MPA graduate.

Athletic Fields

A constant call from the parents of child athletes in Blacksburg is that the town's athletic fields/facilities pail in comparison to similar localities. How does the town stack up in terms of numbers of fields per type? How does the town stack up in terms of available resources per potential child athlete (18 and under)? Could the usage of town facilities by VT students sway any findings? Adam Lloyd, the Athletic Supervisor will be the contact for this issue.

Public Works/Environmental

This area wasn't discussed at length because the Superintendent wasn't able to attend the meeting. However, the town manager believes there is potentially a lot that can be studied in regards to recycling rates and internal environmental issues. If you are interested in this area I will put you in contact with Susan Garrison, the Superintendent.

Skate Park

The town would be interested in knowing how much the new skate park is being used, who is using it, and what the general opinion of the park is. Adam Lloyd, the Athletic Supervisor will be the contact for this issue.

Affordable Housing

A longtime issue in Blacksburg, the provision of affordable housing is complex and difficult. To help make decisions about what a town can do, many different types of data need to be collected and analyzed. The main issue that came up was that houses that are built at a small enough size to be affordable to lower income families are most often quickly bought up by real estate investors and rented out to VT students. Blacksburg's entire housing market is actually about 70% rentals. What would need to be figured out is what type of property is considered "affordable housing," how many of them end up being rentals instead of owner occupied, and does the fact that VT is next store have a significant influence. Also, can the houses be categorized in some way. For example, if this relationship between affordable and student rentals exists, does it go away the farther the property is from campus? Town Manager Mark Verneil will be the contact on this one.

South Main Street Impact

The town is interested in knowing the potential impacts of the huge South Main Street development (the one with the potential Walmart). In a town this size, what would be the expected impacts/returns of a big box store vs. small stores or mixed use? This is a complex issue and it will take a little work to narrow it down to something doable, but it can certainly be done. Town Manager Mark Verneil will be the contact on this one.

Funding the Volunteer Fire Department

The town pays the vast majority of the operating expenses and capital expenses (e.g. buying trucks) for the Volunteer Fire Department. The service area of the department, however, includes the surrounding county. The town is interested in coming up with a formula that divides costs appropriately between the town and county. The town is further interested whether or not there might not be a different formula for operating vs. capital expenses. How do other towns/counties do it? Is there a "typical" method used in comparable localities, or are there multiple forms? Chief Keith Bolte will be the contact on this topic. The town manager thinks this one could be very useful to the town.

Funding the Volunteer Rescue Squad

The town pays the vast majority of the operating expenses and capital expenses (e.g. buying ambulances) for the Volunteer Rescue Squad. The service area of the rescue squad, however, includes the surrounding county. The town is interested in coming up with a formula that divides costs appropriately between the town and county. The town is further interested whether or not there might not be a different formula for operating vs. capital expenses. How do other towns/counties do it? Is there a "typical" method used in comparable localities, or are there

multiple forms? Chief Sid Bingley will be the contact on this topic. The town manager thinks this one could be very useful to the town.

Old Blacksburg Middle School

What to do with old BMS has been a heated question the past few years in Blacksburg. The town is going to be sponsoring a design competition to hopefully come up with some ideas for what to do with the property. The town will be encouraging professional design firms to team up with development professionals to come up with some ideas that might actually work financially. However, before the whole process gets started, the town is interested in the opinions of the general public as to what should be done with the property. The town would like to use this information to help direct the design competition in the most promising/desirable directions. Additionally, it could be interesting to know if differences of opinion break down by some variables (e.g. age, years of residency, distance from downtown). The town manager thinks this one could be very useful to the town.

Runaway Growth

A recent concern that has been voiced to town officials is that the town is experiencing "runaway growth." The town doesn't believe this to be the case. The town would like to get a "growth profile" that might measure Blacksburg across some key standards and be compared to comparable towns/cities. The town manager thinks this one could be very useful to the town. Town Manager Mark Verneil will be the contact on this one.

Citizen Survey

Blacksburg participated in the ICMA annual national survey of towns/cities. The survey measures many aspects related to "quality of life." The town has participated twice to date (you can see the latest at their web site). Because the questions are the same in each survey, the town would be interested to know which indicators are trending in what directions, and whether or not these trends are "real." This would involve some significance testing and comparisons with other town to decipher if changes are relevant just to the town or are part of a national trend.