

To: Steve Pelletier, Chair  
TDI Board of Directors  
Cc: Mark Waltz, Town Manager  
From: Jacob Sesker, Harpswell Strategies  
Re: Recap & Recommendations  
Date: February 20, 2026

It was a privilege to work with TDI's Board of Directors at its recent retreat. This brief memorandum will summarize the key takeaways from our discussion and provide some recommendations for next steps as TDI continues its strategic planning process.

### **Retreat Recap**

#### (1) Strengths & Weaknesses

TDI's **strengths** generally fell into two categories: structural strengths and personal strengths. Structural strengths of TDI include its financial resources and the ability to deploy those resources to further its mission, as well as the continuity on the Board of Directors ("history," "flexibility," "responsiveness," etc.). Personal strengths emanated from the unique combination of talent, knowledge, community spirit, and integrity of the members of TDI's board ("courage," "civil discourse," "knowledgeable," etc.).

Those present identified several **weaknesses**: generally speaking, those weaknesses related to the organization's broad mission or lack of focus, not enough resources to follow through and complete tasks, a perception that TDI is too focused on real estate matters, and a lack of demographic diversity &/or succession planning.

**The group also identified some characteristics that were both strengths and weaknesses**, for example: a high level of engagement by board members and the appearance or perception of conflicts of interest (which is a common problem for economic development boards – they tend to be less effective without real estate industry representation, but that representation can lead to problems building or maintaining trust in the community); similarly, it was noted that there was a diversity of opinion and expertise, but a lack of demographic diversity (including a board comprised predominantly of older white men); while continuity and the expertise on the board were strengths, the age of board members generally and the potential for near-term loss of knowledge were identified as weaknesses; and the organization's flexibility is a strength, but it is one that

flows from having financial resources, while also having an outdated plan and no current programs or staff capacity to implement.

## (2) Opportunities & Threats

**Opportunities** identified generally related to developable land with good access/visibility, ability to develop mixed-use or single-use nodes on a larger scale, and opportunities to engage on comprehensive plan implementation and on the larger issue of delivering amenities (such as those identified by the community during the comprehensive planning process, or more housing supply) to the community.

In discussing **threats**, the group identified both threats to economic opportunity and prosperity (such as housing and transportation affordability, lack of caregivers, inflation and price volatility, NIMBY-ism) as well as threats to TDI and to boards, commissions, and regional business groups generally (such as the threat of declining public engagement and volunteerism).

## (3) Purpose and Mission Statement

There was general agreement during our discussion of the **mission and purpose statement** that TDI's mission is to foster, promote, and support community and economic development in Topsham.

## (4) Programs

Generally, the group was eager to identify additional programs to initiate or expand. The group was hesitant to identify the kinds of strategic tradeoffs necessary to focus narrowly on the core mission. This is often the case and is an indication that more strategic planning work remains to be done.

Some examples of the kinds of **programs or actions** recommended include: providing a forum for collaboration/annual meetings with other boards and committees; an annual meeting with the Select Board to discuss economic development trends and issues; business retention meetings with local businesses; updating the Tax Increment Financing program; preparation of marketing materials such as a "why Topsham?" flier; benchmarking Topsham against its competitor markets; establishing (in coordination with town staff) development process and development fee summaries; and communication and advocacy on economic development issues facing the town and its businesses.

On the flip side, those present expressed concerns as well: concerns about volunteer burnout and volunteers being over-committed; a desire to see less talk and more action; and a desire to spend less time focusing on specific real estate projects.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are items that, in my professional opinion, should be among your near-term priorities (over the next 12-24 months).

**Complete the economic development strategic planning process.** Two indicators that there is more work to be done include the long list of potential TDI activities and the group's struggle to identify the tradeoffs necessary to focus on executing the core mission. Rather than using a retreat format, I suggest that TDI engage us to put together some potential priority actions and assist with developing decision-making criteria. With that work product in hand, we could begin to work with the Board to develop a realistic action plan in a workshop session.

**In developing programs and priorities, focus on concepts and principles rather than real estate projects.** Rather than focus on specific properties, shift the discussion to the opportunities that those projects represent. Ultimately, TDI can and must be engaged in studies that relate to specific real estate; however, at this point TDI should focus on building trust with the community and establishing a values-based approach to serving the community. This approach will help lay the groundwork for future success.

**Prioritize/emphasize engagements that deliver amenities to the community.** In establishing priorities and communicating about TDI's work program, the emphasis should be on what the community wants and needs rather than on specific business or development opportunities. To the extent possible, TDI should tie its priorities to those that the community has expressed through other public processes (such as comprehensive planning) and focus on communicating about TDI's role in helping to deliver amenities that the community itself has identified.

**Placemaking and gateways should be prioritized.** The two gateways are also the most significant placemaking opportunities: Main Street from the bridge/riverfront to Town Hall, and the northeast quadrant of the I-295 intersection (including the Crooker property and other nearby properties). Those represent the places most likely to/capable of affecting the perceptions of Topsham residents and visitors.

**Fill future Board of Directors vacancies following the completion of the strategic planning process.** Roger Sirois attended the meeting as an incoming Board member, and

his experience at Atlantic Federal Credit Union and in the community will be a welcome and important addition to the Board of Directors. To fill other current or future vacancies, the Board/Town should wait until *after* the strategic plan is completed, at which point the future resources & activities of the Board will be better understood. Doing so will help ensure that the overall composition of the Board is aligned with the Board's priorities – for example, if TDI is going to be more engaged in advocacy and communication, it may be advisable to look for individuals in the community with marketing expertise rather than simply filling the position with the next willing and able body. In addition, I recommend gauging the level of long-term commitment of current board members (or their interest in serving as officers in the future) before seeking new members.

**Working with the Town, TDI should author a new TIF policy.** As noted by the Town Manager, a new TIF policy is needed. Typically, the TIF policy will address issues such as under what circumstances tax increment financing will be utilized or how decisions should be made with respect to the portion of the increment that can be utilized to finance development. This effort would be a short-term value-add for the Town and create an opportunity for TDI to have more exposure and visibility with the Select Board. Other potential reasons to engage in this work “sooner than later” include the fact that TIF districts could be a resource used to fund future TDI activities, and that TDI may identify opportunities to reduce reliance on impact fee revenue by strategically expanding the use of TIF districts.

**Focus on “laying the groundwork” for future efforts.** In our discussion about potential projects, some areas of overlap were apparent to me as a consultant. Answering the “why Topsham?” question requires understanding Topsham's competitive position - some of that work has already been done in the excellent and exhaustive corridor study that Camoin completed in 2022. Additional work can and should be done to benchmark Topsham against its competitors, peers, and neighbors. If, as I suspect, part of the answer to “why Topsham?” is that it is a business-friendly (or friendlier) central location with large developable parcels and excellent access and visibility, then reviewing the development process and development fees with the Town staff is an exercise that will be well-worth the time. Understanding the current process and fee structure is “step 1,” but streamlining the process and fee structure may turn out to be a necessary “step 2.” Once that work is underway, TDI will be able to tell a more compelling story in its communication with potential developers or investors. I suggest prioritizing these several related initiatives in the near-term. TDI should know what story it is telling about Topsham before starting any significant outreach to the local business community!

**Maintain focus on TDI's value by establishing performance measures.** After the strategic plan and action plan have been completed, TDI should develop performance measures that can be tracked and communicated to the Select Board annually, and which are relevant to both businesses and households.