

A Delicate Balance

Of course this project is not the first attempt at planning for St. George. Interviews and casual conversation with residents of the town, along with people who have been involved in previous planning efforts, make this clear. Several have suggested that they are not convinced that anything will change because of this work. Whilst they are supportive of the effort, they are sceptical! Concern about “inertia”, too much discussion and not enough decision-making, action, and follow-up quality assurance were highlighted as problems “propagating a sense of hopelessness” that anything would be achieved. If that is a widely held position, this is a challenge!

Encouragingly most people who responded to the survey saw it as a “*good start*” to engaging with the community. Others specifically called for developing “*A unified vision for the Town and World Heritage Site and the professional capacity and Government support to implement it.*” But red flags were raised about “*many splinter groups duplicating effort*”, the lack of a joined up approach to the development of a vision and unified plan, and a subsequent lack of “accountability.” These cannot be ignored, and with the pending release of the updated World Heritage Site Management Plan for St George’s, trying to advance a strategic plan too far before that sees the light of day is cautioned. But that does not mean we shouldn’t start the process and explore how St Georgians see their Town evolving.

To bring about the change that is necessary to achieve a specific vision requires a sustained commitment to make those changes. It’s not going to be easy. People must believe the vision is realistic, attainable, and desirable. They must want the change and believe that it will improve their lives and their community, or they will not support it. Without the support of the community no plan will succeed.

There is no doubt there is some frustration that resistance to change is stifling economic opportunity at the east end of Bermuda. Interestingly, a report by the Bermuda Economic Development Council as part of the background to declaring St George an Economic Empowerment Zone in 2011, considers that historically, St Georgians have been liberal and progressive in their thinking and open to new ideas.

Yet, when a small group of local stakeholders was recently presented with the question “what characteristics define the town?” the responses “conservative” and “resistant to change” were included.

Without understanding and addressing the causes of resistance, progress will be challenged. Some members of the community are clearly fearful that “economic development” is at odds with the preservation of the Town’s undeniably significant heritage and “old world charm”.

Developing a shared vision that is respectful of and leverages the heritage assets of the town to promote economic rehabilitation may help reconcile these opposing viewpoints. We need to find better ways to communicate and reassure people that economic development, far from being a threat to the preservation of the Town’s heritage, is likely critical to its ongoing protection.

The reality is that it is the absence of a healthy local economy that presents the greatest hurdle for the Town in preparing for the future.

But before we delve into what people said, first, a little history