

INTRODUCTION

St George's is special – this is widely recognised. It is unique and retains so much charm, natural beauty, and original built heritage that it won the UNESCO World Heritage Site designation. UNESCO reports that “The Historic Town of St George with its related fortifications is an outstanding example of a continuously occupied, fortified, colonial town dating from the early 17th century, and the oldest English town in the New World.” <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/983/>

This globally recognised World Heritage Site is both a source of pride to residents and a significant visitor-based economic opportunity. Yet it is widely recognised that this opportunity has not yet been optimally leveraged with many believing that much more can and should be done to celebrate and capitalise on the heritage assets of the town of St. George and immediate surrounds.

St. George is also a living town, with residents who aspire to the benefits of modern society. Meeting the aspirations of 21st century residents whilst protecting and celebrating the assets that won the World Heritage Site designation is a challenge that requires careful planning. But it is also a challenge that presents great opportunity if properly addressed.

Today, whilst St. George' stakeholders share many opinions, there are a range of viewpoints regarding the desired future for the town. There are those more preservation-minded people who resist change and feel that the UNESCO designation should drive planning for the future, whilst others feel that protection of heritage assets should not constrain the development of a modern community. Meeting the aspirations of such divergent perspectives along with the majority in the middle will require compromise and the forging of a vision that the majority are happy with will be difficult, but the task is well worth engaging in. As a renowned American community planner once said,

“Growth is inevitable and desirable, but destruction of community character is not. The question is not whether your part of the world is going to change. The question is how.”

So what is this document all about?

In order to better plan for how St. George can move forwards, to meet the desires of the community whilst respecting and benefitting from the remarkable heritage assets that it possesses, the St George's Town Council has determined the need for a Strategic Plan for the Town.

A Strategic Plan can explore subjects such as economic growth, infrastructure, housing, historic resources, public safety, transportation, arts and culture, social and environmental issues, and identify potential financing mechanisms. Properly structured, such a plan is not prescriptive but rather provides the framework for a living document that can evolve as the community's needs evolve.

As a starting point, this document is intended to stimulate this process. It seeks to present some of the key facts about the Town, both historic and current, as well as to share feedback from a community survey undertaken in September-October 2020 and from consultations and conversations with residents, council, advisory bodies and business leaders. In order to figure out where and how St Georgians want the Town to evolve, we need to understand where the starting line is - what the community feels about the Town of St George today, what works, what doesn't and what kind of vision the residents and business community have for the future of the Town. Without this we cannot possibly seek to agree a way forwards as a community.

To kick things off, an initial invitation was extended to 1,100 households through the post in postcodes GE01-GE-05 to participate in the online survey - 297 responses were received, with a lot of comments. It is clear those who responded felt strongly about St George! Just a note – if you don't feel your views are adequately represented here, don't panic. This is just a starting point and there will be opportunity for lots more community input.

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