



# Focus Group Report

## **Focus Group Overview**

As part of the City of Franklin's strategic planning process, focus groups were conducted on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2024. Summaries of the major themes discussed by the focus groups are contained on the following pages. The participants were recruited by the City of Franklin and consisted of businesses, other taxing districts, residents, and employees of the City of Franklin.

## **Focus Group Process**

A focus group is a small-group discussion guided by a trained facilitator. It is used to gather in-depth information about a community's thoughts and opinions on a specific topic. The interaction enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to reevaluate and reconsider their own understanding of their specific experiences. The facilitator, whose role is to gather information in an impartial and confidential manner, manages the pace of the discussion, and ensures that everyone has a chance to participate. The group meets for a limited duration, and all participants were recruited by city leadership. The process typically includes a set of questions and a follow-up discussion within the small group.

In the case of Franklin's focus groups, the discussion topics were strengths and challenges for the City around economic development. At the conclusion of each focus group, each participant was asked to identify areas for the City to focus efforts and resources on over the next five years specifically regarding economic development. This structure requires participants to prioritize their thoughts in a succinct manner and may provide a summary of key strategic issues to be considered using the qualitative data from the rest of the report.

## **Focus Group Context within the Strategic Planning Process**

The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions in a way that complements other data collection methods, such as surveys or one-to-one interviews. These attitudes, feelings, and beliefs may be partially independent of a group or its social setting. However, they are more likely to be revealed via the social gathering and the interaction which being in a focus group entail. Focus groups help to generate qualitative data that identify general themes of importance to the community.

## **Focus Group Questions/Areas of Exploration**

A broad set of questions were developed to guide the focus group discussions. The questions provided areas to explore rather than a strict outline to follow. Follow-up questions were asked during each session

based upon the answers given, to explore the answers or issues more deeply. The questions are listed below:

**Questions:**

1. What do you like best about the retail and commercial environment in Franklin?
2. When you think about Franklin as compared to other nearby suburban communities, what comes to mind about the economic development challenges here?
3. What are the advantages of economic development in Franklin as compared to other places?
4. If you could change things about Franklin what would they be?
5. Of the important roles that the City plays in helping to create a good environment for economic development, what are the most important to creating a high-quality future?
6. If you could choose two things for the City to focus efforts and resources on over the next five years, what would they be?

**Major Themes:**

**A Vision for the City**

There is no central or downtown area that business naturally gravitates to, so something has to be intentionally created. Ballpark Commons was a vision, and outside of that there isn't much to draw people to Franklin.

Franklin has undeveloped land available and that is an enviable asset, but one that must be used wisely. There is an opportunity to balance urban and rural to make something truly unique, but there are infrastructure costs to consider as well. There needs to be a balance between residential and commercial, but it's unclear what the balance should be and with what kind of housing. High end apartments? Complemented with quality retail? Or something different? High end restaurants would work well in that mix, but a couple have opened and closed. We need to have a vision that incorporates everything right here in Franklin to keep people shopping where they live.

One group discussed that other communities often have one person with vision, who is willing to buy up property and make enemies kicking out businesses that don't fit the vision in order to really make it happen. That kind of single-minded developer keeps the end in mind and has purpose. If the City doesn't have that person, the City may need to become that to have the economic development that they want. However, that would require that the overall needs of Franklin be promoted, even if it had unpleasant impacts on a small number of residents. Instead, the City could develop a plan over several years with buffering areas to insulate residents from the impact of development. However, one resident noted that development advantages should be weighed against the impact on existing residents, as consistent or loud noise can disrupt quality of life.

A business park would be a good alternative for the City to consider but then workforce development, transportation, and housing needs to be considered as well. Referendums are unsustainable and tax levies are a challenge. These issues require vision, planning, and some sort of economic development solution.

## **Location**

Franklin is conveniently located near the airport and the interstate. It's close enough to Milwaukee that people can go to downtown, but far enough away that the issues don't impact Franklin. Locally there is good theater, but people can go downtown as well. People can afford to live in Franklin, there are areas to grow, and the taxes are affordable. A lot of the value of Franklin is lost according to one group because it's too closely associated with Milwaukee. The City needs to differentiate itself, focus on amenities like parks, schools, strong fire and police departments and better show all of the great things the City has to offer.

## **Internal Process**

Focus group participants noted that Franklin hasn't always been seen as business friendly but that has improved. The approval process could be better streamlined. The market moves fast and there are additional costs incurred if interest rates change and if professionals such as architects have to attend multiple meetings. A lot of committees touch the same project and it really can slow things down, making Franklin less attractive for development. The Environmental Committee and other committees give directions that are at odds with each other.

There are areas on the Comp Plan and the Council needs a policy to guide development. People go to the Plan Commissions to ask for exceptions, but it should be clearer. The groups noted that the UDO was being updated and that should help. But the City should be proactive by making it clear what the City would be open to having for development, and then incentivizing those developers that come with plans that are consistent with that vision.

The internal process is better under the new administration, and staff move things along faster. In other communities, standards are outlined up front and you meet with the appropriate staff all at once, up front. That helps a developer know if the community is right for their development right away. Otherwise, they spend money to bring in a proposal that is declined and that gives Franklin a bad reputation for business. One challenge is that Franklin does not have enough staff focused on development in-house. We need the appropriate staffing to be able to recruit the kinds of businesses we want and walk them through the process of opening a business in the City.

## **Collaboration**

The City is seen as more cooperative now than in the past, and that is helpful. Particularly for taxing bodies, residents want to see that all of them work together for the benefit of the community. There is an opportunity to keep high school students in the area through internships, both in the City itself and in area businesses. It benefits the kids to have exposure to different types of jobs and a variety of work experiences and it benefits the businesses as they get to know the student over time and if they could potentially be a good permanent hire.

## **Telling the Story of Franklin**

One group noted that if you don't tell your story, other will tell it for you. The City hasn't always had a good reputation externally. However, they also noted that the City has recognized this, and they are working on it. They said that the City is making progress.

## **Two Priorities for Franklin**

At the conclusion of the focus groups, participants were asked, “If you could choose two things for the City to focus efforts and resources on over the next five years, what would they be?” After an hour of sharing ideas, perspectives, and suggestions about a variety of topics, this question encourages participants to narrow the number of priorities to just the two that they feel are most important.

Responses are tallied into the following categories, with each bullet representing one response, except for those ending with a number in parentheses. Those numbers indicate the number of participants who indicated that this was a priority. The top few responses are highlighted in yellow.

### **Business Recruitment**

- Focused recruitment into vacant spaces (2)
- Self-sustaining businesses that contribute to tax base

### **Process**

- Clear process and procedures for development followed consistently (5)
- Unified vision for economic development (comp plan, zoning) (4)
- More economic development staff
- Update comp and master plan (2)
- Clear focus on strategic planning (2)
- Decisions based on best needs of residents/community engagement around vision

### **Land use**

- Central community space for shopping and dining (6)
- More industrial development in a central location (2)
- Southwest corner should be planned with green space and development
- Clear plan for greenspace in future development
- Connectivity (bike trails, etc) through the City

### **Miscellaneous**

- Original development- don't duplicate others
- Focus on bringing more people to Franklin

Respectfully Submitted,



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