

# BOMA/Saint Paul Chamber/BRC Focus Group

---

**April 11, 2017**

*Question 1: What are the key issues affecting your business success and/or the occupancy of your building over the next 10-20 years?*

*Question 2: How does transportation (including transit, bikes, and pedestrian facilities) impact your business –e.g. how does it impact your ability to recruit and retain employees, or to move product, or to attract customers?*

*Question 3: How does the availability of affordable housing choices impact your business? Is there a relationship between transportation and housing costs for your employees or customers?*

## **Summary of Main Themes**

Job Creation: There is demand for creative jobs and a skilled workforce.

Workforce Retention: The workforce is diversifying and businesses need to reflect this. A good central location helps recruit and retain employees.

Planning and Policy: Planners should be focused on increasing the tax base, increasing density, and promoting downtown office and industrial spaces. The city should support the interests of the business community.

Infrastructure: City should expand dialog with the community about upcoming projects and provide a roadmap of the process.

Transit: With changing funding dynamics, the city needs less expensive solutions to increase transit connections and bring people into downtown.

Pedestrian Accessibility: Increase and improve bike connectivity to bring more people into the city.

Safety and Crime: Maintain clean and safe streets and skyways.

Housing Affordability: Housing within reasonable distance of downtown and business districts is not affordable to young working people or seniors.

Place-making/Neighborhood Development: Activate street level vitality by utilizing public spaces and hosting events in downtown.

## **Main Themes (All Responses):**

### **Job Creation**

- Need creative jobs
- Skilled workforce: operational and maintenance workers
- We need to turn people into good workers

### **Workforce Retention**

- Good central location helps with employee recruitment
- Shift in workforce age, demographics and skill set
- Need to diversify workforce using work readiness programs. Bring employees to the East Metro.
- I would like to attract a more diverse employee base.
- Retention of existing businesses
- Generational shift in preference. Catalytic projects help set the expectations or the role of government.
- Embrace the new, disruptive technologies

### **Planning and Policy**

- 20 years is not a typical planning horizon for a business
- Balance between city wants and land use requirements. More density than the market can support at this time. Example: Soccer Stadium –market is bringing a two story office and single story retail. Waiting to go with market today.
- How does the city/comp plan help prepare neighborhoods, voters to support density. Help identify the benefits (building tax base and connection to property taxes)
- Need commercial tax base, better balance of commercial and residential
- Downtown planning that is supportive of the business community. Need more specific so businesses know how they can fit in. Honestly in project readiness and timeline.
- Office/tech space that can accommodate industrial is being used for office and not reserved for industrial. This space is cheaper, with free parking.
- Promote downtown
- Need for leadership that understands business
- District councils are over-powered. Why not have the equivalent for businesses? How closely does city council listen to district councils vs. businesses? There is an imbalance. District councils are overturning density decisions. Are people more or less likely to do business in St. Paul after fighting with district councils? People give up.
- Business improvement district

### **Infrastructure**

- Difficult to find the mix of office and “industrial” space
- Not enough land for “light” industrial
- Riverview is a good regional connection point that will lead to better paying jobs and more amenities.

- How do we change funding dynamics to realize ideas for infrastructure?
- DSI and Public Works: good access, understanding of development process, understanding of “why”, should facilitate dialog without having to have community members intervene.
- Need more visual checks, single point of contact (liaison)
- Need an intro to what the process will be like –a road map, checklist
- It is difficult to navigate the road improvements
- Need for signage to get to freeway

### **Transit**

- Transit connection to airport (Riverview) and Western to bring in people faster
- Connections to airport is key in leasing downtown office space
- How do we change funding dynamics to realize ideas for transit?
- We need a less expensive transit solution until funding comes
- Freight? Rice Street near Arlington and Cottage is not good for semis. Need for greater capacity, safety of roads.
- Green Line and A Line are good, but North and South need to be connected
- Perception of difficulty to get around downtown by car
- LRT is a big influence for being downtown
- Allow free lot parking of off lot sites
- Enough parking, but is it close enough to where people are going. People expect short walks –is this reasonable? Minnesotans care more about parking than elsewhere.
- Is there parking near where people work? Do they know where it is? How do you get there?

### **Pedestrian Accessibility**

- Biking connectivity is key to having great connections
- Bike loop downtown
- Bike trails are adding to downtown vibrancy and will help make more than “5 pm” downtown
- More bikeway improvements
- Wide sidewalks, space to move

### **Safety and Crime**

- Safety –streets clean, skyways clean
- Safety –skyways, transit
- Ordinance to state standards of behavior

### **Housing Affordability**

- Big demand for affordable housing. Funding challenges
- Younger people want to live closer to work often
- Attract employees from affordable housing
- Demand for all types of housing in the city
- Hurdles are challenging which makes it impossible to develop affordable housing
- Affordable housing near job centers

- Spatial mismatch between jobs and affordable housing
- Land banks
- Market rate is not affordable
- Housing needed to retain younger folks
- Availability of family sized apartments
- Exit interviews –why do people live here? Build on those assets to create vibrancy (i.e. love of grocery store and need for more access to downtown)
- Majority of employees do not work in the city, many other Ramsey suburbs
- City can be over-priced for mid to late 20-year-olds
- Housing prices have gone up downtown
- Families are moving out for amenities
- Tough to find affordable senior housing

### **Place-Making and Neighborhood Development**

- There is a lot of dead space (i.e. alleyways, first floor of parking facilities, skyway)
- Lunch hour exercise, bike/way
- Outdoor events are more difficult to do in St. Paul
- More frequent events downtown
- Plantings
- Street level vitality
- Skyway vitality
- Activate public space
- Central station amenities