

Oak Bluffs Streetscape MASTER PLAN

July 2015



Acknowledgements

Streetscape Committee

Brian Packish, Chair
Erik Albert, Wayfinding Chair
Douglas Abdenour, Jr.
Amy Billings
Duncan Ross
Gail Barmakian
John Bradford
Chuck Sullivan
Christine Todd

Board of Selectmen

Walter Vail, Chairman
Kathleen Burton
Gail Barmakian
Gregory Coogan
Michael Santoro

Planning Board

Brian Packish, Chair
Erik Albert
Robert Fehl
Kris W. Chvatal
Ewell Hopkins

Town Administrator

Robert Whritenour

Town Department, Committee, & Community Representatives

Steve Auerbach, Finance and Advisory Committee
Chief Erik Blake, Police Department
Alice Boyd, Bailey Boyd Associates
John Breckenridge, Harbor Management Committee
Elizabeth Durkee, Conservation Committee
Francis Gould, MVCMA
Joan Hughes, Conservation Commission
Margaret Knight, Community Preservation Committee
Todd Alexander, Harbormaster

Town Staff

Alice Butler
Shelley Carter
Sheetal Grande
Gladys Toscano

Martha's Vineyard Commission Liaison

Christine Flynn

Consultants

Horsley Witten Group
Carr, Lynch and Sandell
ConsultEcon
SurfaceMatter Design

Thank You!

Thank you to all who took the time to fill out a survey and to attend a public meeting. Your efforts made this a better plan.

Special Thanks

Oak Bluffs Public Library
Union Chapel



Horsley Witten Group



Table of Contents

- i. INTRODUCTION 1
- 1. EXISTING CONDITIONS 3
- 2. COMMUNITY VISIONING..... 13
- 3. CALIBRATED GOALS 21
 - GOAL 1: Connections25
 - GOAL 2: North Bluff.....41
 - GOAL 3: Circuit / Kennebec61
 - *PARKING IMPACT76
 - GOAL 4: Steamship Authority Arrival.....79
 - GOAL 5: Streetscape Materials.....85
 - GOAL 6: Green Streets.....95
 - GOAL 7: Universal Design99
- 4. IMPLEMENTATION 103
- APPENDICES 110
 - APPENDIX A: Public Visioning Results
 - APPENDIX B: Wayfinding Master Plan
 - APPENDIX C: Downtown Market Analysis
 - APPENDIX D: Design Alternatives
- IMAGE CREDITS



Introduction

Downtown Oak Bluffs is clearly one of a kind. Possessing a rare combination of historic character, exceptional architecture, connection to the water, and a distinct central core, the bones of the village are largely intact. The community continues to be a popular summer resort, while also supporting a thriving year-round population.

Over time, concerns with the quality of the public realm led to a community movement to re-envision how the village functions and is perceived by residents, business owners, and visitors. The Town recently conducted a slums and blight inventory, which pointed to a need to continue support of downtown revitalization and planning as 49% of the 93 buildings in the survey area received an overall rating of “fair” to “poor” – meeting the criteria for slums and blight. In support of these efforts the Town participated in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts DHCD’s “Peer to Peer Program” which organized a team of downtown development experts to visit the community in order to assess existing conditions and to make recommendations to help stimulate ideas to support economic development.

Following this study, the Town applied Community Development Block Grant program funds to support a Downtown Streetscape Master Plan effort. The Oak Bluffs Downtown Streetscape Master Plan is the framework for future planning, development, and design of Oak Bluffs - working with the distinctive existing character of the Downtown. Oak Bluffs’ actions reflect its recognition of the ability of public action – through zoning and land use policy,

infrastructure investments, technical assistance, facilitation, cooperation, and leadership – to inform and influence the action of private capital. Efforts such as these, in effect, aligning the interests of the public and private sectors, can yield powerful results for the public good.

Streetscape Committee

A 9-member committee of volunteers including representatives of the Planning Board, Board of Selectmen, Oak Bluffs Association, as well as residents and members of the downtown business community, continues to spearhead the Streetscape Master Plan process. The Committee’s first task was selection of the Streetscape Master Plan’s motto: “Making a great place greater” – noting an ethos for the project to refine what is already a well-loved

“What brought me to the table is my love for Oak Bluffs and my belief that the people of Oak Bluffs need to be the ones who decide what Oak Bluffs will be.”

– Brian Packish, Committee Chair

and special place. The Committee met on a weekly basis through the fall and winter of 2014-2015 to coordinate public outreach, help gather data and build an existing conditions inventory, coordinate with local officials, business owners, and the general public, and finally, work to determine a consensus community vision statement.

Existing Conditions

1

1 Existing Conditions *Study Area*

Great Place Greater

Because the Oak Bluffs Downtown Business District is already such a well loved place, the master plan process began by defining what the term “streetscape master plan” means to Oak Bluffs. Oak Bluffs’ historic, architectural and cultural character is paramount to the downtown’s sense of place and the public’s community values. Any investments or improvements within the downtown require acknowledgement of that special character as a central principle. In Oak Bluffs, the downtown “master plan” already manifests in the centuries-old patterns of streets and parks, the Victorian cottage architecture, the waterfront vibe, the arts scene, the music, and so much more. The end goal of a “master plan” was envisioned not as a change in direction but more as a roadmap to strategically improving what already exists. To clearly demonstrate this commitment, “Great Place Greater” was selected by the Committee as the central theme of the current master plan project, acknowledging the past, realizing the special character of the present, and understanding that improvements and adjustments are necessary to add value for the future.

Arrival & Gateways: We’re Here! Now What?

The most common arrival for Martha’s Vineyard residents and visitors is via the Steamship Authority ferry (SSA). In 2010, over 90% of ferry passengers to the island arrived via the SSA ferry, and of those arrivals, approximately 25% were to Oak Bluffs. Arrival via ferry during peak summer periods is sometimes a chaotic experience, as large groups of passengers disembark at once. SSA arrival experience was improved with recent streetscape upgrades to Oak Bluffs Avenue and Seaview Avenue, but unclear wayfinding and a daunting pedestrian crossing of Seaview Avenue make the initial orientation to the downtown stressful and confusing. Many visitors bypass the downtown business district entirely, not knowing they are a short walk away. For those already on island, there is no clear sense of arrival to the downtown when arriving by car, bicycle, or on foot. Signage, wayfinding, and streetscape materials are inconsistent. In some locations not enough wayfinding is present, and in others too much signage with varying size and style detracts from a clear signal of arrival.



View of the Vineyard Sound and the Oak Bluffs Harbor entrance



Circuit Avenue



The historic Arcade building



Healey Square



1 Existing Conditions *Study Area*

Parks & Open Space

Although a stone's throw from extensive high-quality parks and beaches including Ocean Park, Hartford Park, Niantic Park, Seaview Beach, and private but publicly accessible Trinity Park within the Camp Meeting Association, the downtown study area does not contain any dedicated public open space. Within the downtown itself, streets truly are the public realm – hosting strolls, conversations, gatherings large and small, planned meetings and chance encounters... all while accommodating vehicle parking and providing access to the front doors of the local economy – restaurants, shops, hotels, and more. Pedestrian and bicycle connections from downtown's streets to adjacent open spaces can be a challenge. Despite proximity these connections often are not obvious, and lack consistent streetscape materials, wayfinding, and pedestrian amenities.

Parking

Parking is perceived by local business owners and the general public as one of the more significant frustrations within the downtown; however the challenge is not simply a lack of supply. Convenience of spaces and the perception of the quality and location of available parking have a huge impact on the current perception of parking. The narrowness of Circuit Avenue and Kennebec Avenue combined with the delay caused by Circuit Avenue angled parking spaces, one-way circulation, and lack of east-west connectivity reinforces a perception that excessive circling is necessary to find an open spot. Several local convenience businesses, including the Post Office, the Reliable Market, and Phillips Hardware are located in the heart of the downtown near Healey Square, adding to perceived congestion. In addition, it appears many convenient parking spaces are utilized for long stretches by employees of downtown

businesses.

There are well over 600 parking spaces within a five-minute walk of Healey Square, not including private single-family residential parking or the Camp Meeting Association (CMA). Because Oak Bluffs evolved as a compact, organic place before the advent of the automobile, there is very little available space to add parking within the downtown. Any pedestrian enhancements must balance the need to maintain parking within the heart of the downtown with wayfinding and other improvements that can improve the utilization and experience of parking within a 5-minute walk for visitors and employees.

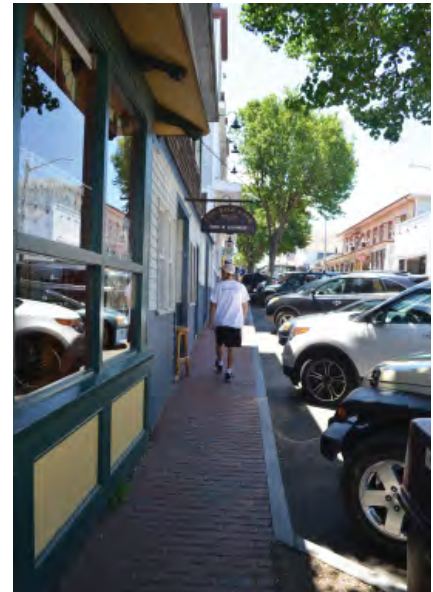
Local Economy

Oak Bluffs Downtown is a thriving, historic summer resort destination that provides a unique mix of stores for resident and tourist markets. Seasonal clusters of destination restaurants, clothes, and gift stores offer comparison shopping stores that appeal to tourist markets. Downtown is also a year round center for stores that meet the day to day needs of Oak Bluffs and Martha's Vineyard residents, including coffee shops, a grocery store, a hardware store, a post office, and hair salons.

Oak Bluffs contains 331 rooms in overnight lodgings, a variety of attractions that including beaches, the town marina, historic sites, indoor amusements, entertainment, and robust comparison shopping clusters of specialty food stores, restaurants, clothing, and accessories, and gift and souvenir shops. Oak Bluffs Downtown is near a number of supportive uses. It is within walking distance of multiple ferry terminals and the Town marina, and proximate to major beaches. Water and outdoor activities are popular. Downtown is adjacent to a National Historic Landmark, the historic cottages and structures of the Martha's Vineyard Camp Meeting Association, as well as a short walking distance to a number of parks and beaches as well as the Island's multi-use trail system and public transit. These attractions and the synergies between the waterfront, beaches, parks, and historic CMA contribute to an unique sense of place that is treasured by residents and visitors alike.



Circuit Avenue Extension where the sidewalk ends



Circuit Avenue narrow brick sidewalk



Circuit Avenue



Kennebec Avenue



Intersection of Seaview Avenue and Oak Bluffs Avenue from the Steamship Authority Terminal

The quality of Oak Bluff's downtown streetscape is challenged by a poorly defined, inconsistent, and often extremely narrow pedestrian realm.

1 Existing Conditions *Study Area: Figure Ground*



Downtown buildings are generally built to the street with minimal setbacks on narrow rights-of-way, framing and enclosing downtown streets as comfortable, vibrant public spaces.

Circuit Avenue buildings form an almost unbroken architectural rhythm. Rear parking and loading from the west side of Kennebec Avenue results in somewhat one-sided frontage, especially south of Healey Way.

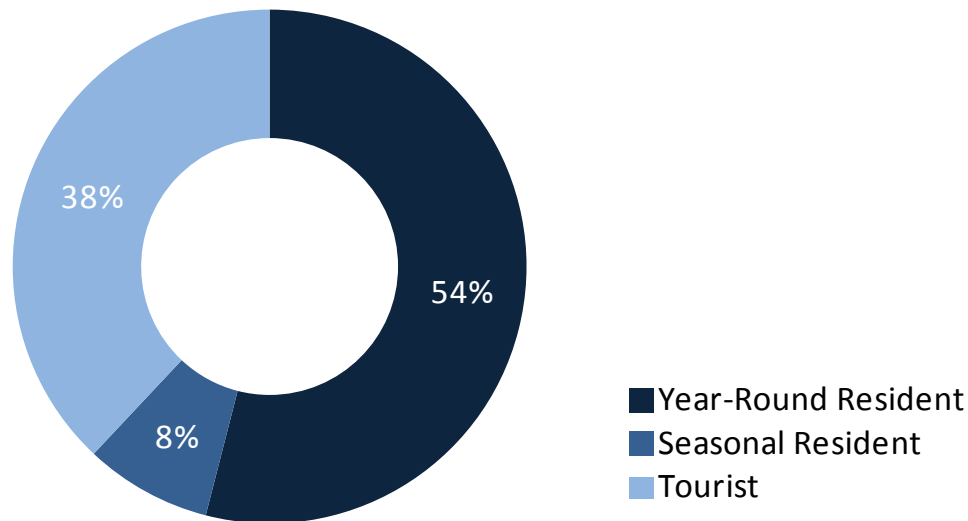
The North Bluff is a juxtaposition of mixed-use commercial buildings clustered closer to Circuit Avenue, and smaller-scale single-family residential to the north and east.



1 Existing Conditions *Economic & Market Analysis*

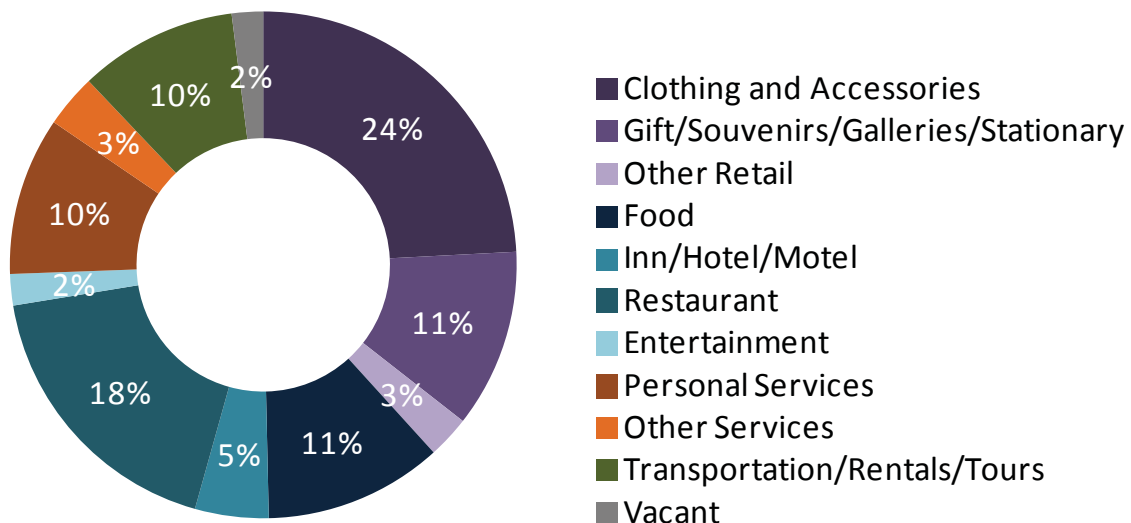
Downtown's seasonal tourist market is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is challenging because residents experience congestion and stress, and many work during the summer to earn a substantial share of their annual household income. Tourists are clearly beneficial to the local economy but can diminish Oak Bluffs' downtown experience for some residents. Yet because tourism is a key base of downtown and Island economy, Oak Bluffs must invest in maintaining and enhancing its tourist market position to expand visitation and related tourist spending while mitigating impacts of tourist market congestion on the quality of the downtown experience for all.

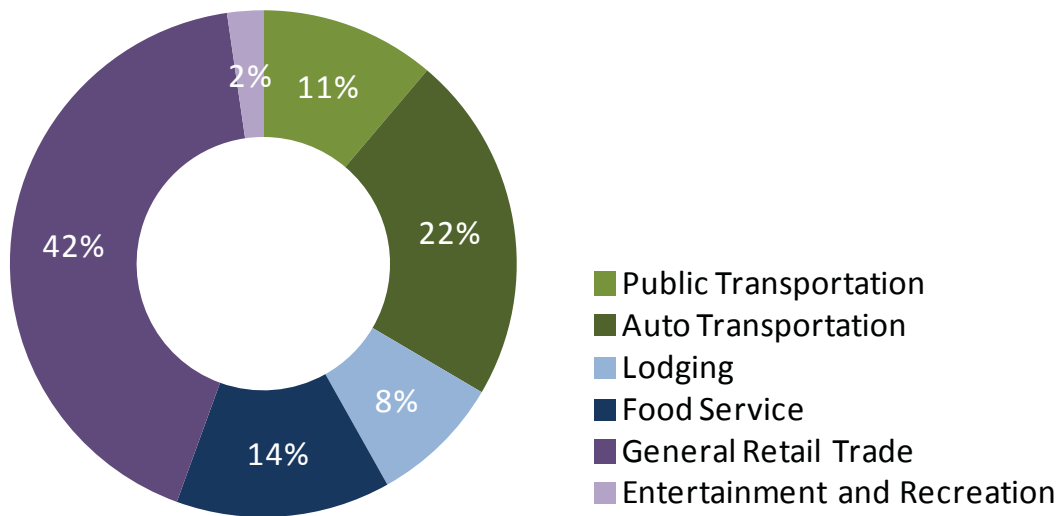
Total Estimated Expenditures



The stores in Oak Bluffs serve a range of resident and tourist markets. Downtown's physical orientation along Circuit Avenue, small and dense storefront spaces supports pedestrian oriented window shopping and casual browsing for comparison goods, such as clothing, accessories, gifts and souvenirs. The density of restaurants supports shopping trips, making downtown a half day to full day destination trip for visitors.

Downtown Oak Bluffs Business Mix



Expenditures by Sector

Occupancy is high and property owners have increased rent for new spaces, which may be a factor in recent business turnover in some spaces. The 100% corner is at Healey Square and Circuit Avenue where the highest rents are found.

Considering the rising number of seasonal residents and the expectation that seasonal homes will be converted into year-round residences in the coming years, the demand for more year-round goods and services will likely rise. General merchandise and home improvement stores are opportunities that would better serve the growing resident market population and support more business activity in Oak Bluffs Downtown.

* Graphs represent data compiled from the Total Trade Area, comprised of Dukes County as a whole.



Circuit Avenue at Healey Square

A photograph of a community visioning workshop. A group of people are gathered in a room, some standing and some sitting at tables, engaged in discussion and writing. An American flag is visible in the background. The image has a blue tint.

Community Visioning

2

2 Community Visioning *Public Outreach*

Webpage & Social Media

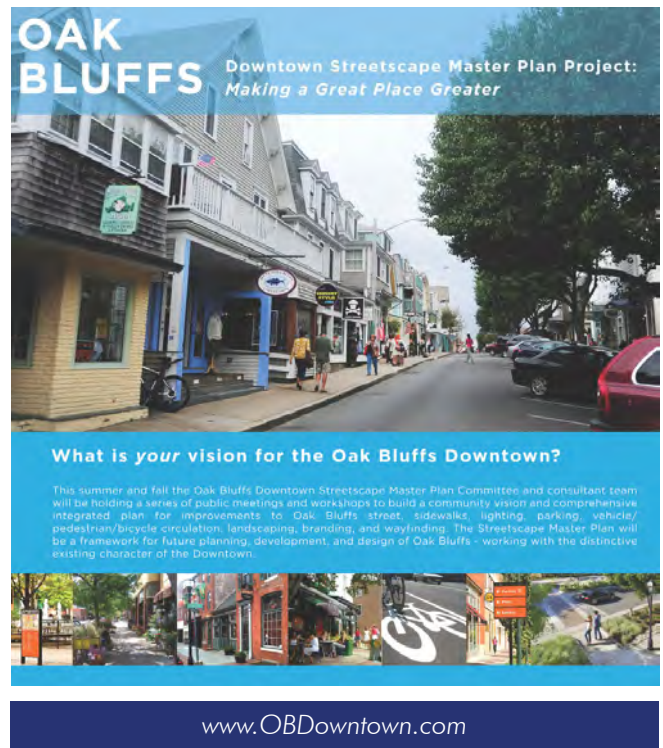
The Streetscape Committee and Project Team sought to maximize opportunity for the public to voice their values, ideas and concerns regarding the project. The downtown's first webpage, Facebook page, and Twitter feed were created during the public participation process to help facilitate meaningful public contribution, continued public engagement. The website and social media platforms were established in such a way that they will continue to serve as an electronic platform for Oak Bluffs' Downtown, even after completion of the Streetscape Master Plan project. Members of the Streetscape Committee continue to play a lead role posting material to the Facebook and Twitter pages, which has been critical in successfully developing a broad network of empowered downtown supporters.

The Consultant Team and Streetscape Committee also designed and distributed posters and flyers promoting the project and upcoming events, and coordinated with Town Staff to send a direct mailing to properties within and near the study area.

Municipal Interviews

At the outset of the project, the consultant team conducted a series of interviews with municipal officials, departments and town boards/committees to identify needs, issues, and concerns. Municipal interviews served as a preliminary data-gathering tool to gain insight into broader issues and concerns. Municipal officials, town staff, and representatives of town boards/committees were interviewed including:

- Finance and Advisory Committee
- Grant Administrator
- Harbor Management Committee
- Friends of Oak Bluffs
- Conservation Commission
- Martha's Vineyard Commission
- Police Department
- Massachusetts Department of Transportation
- Community Preservation Committee
- Camp Meeting Association



OB Downtown Facebook Page

Outreach

On July 23 and 24, 2014 the Consultant Team set up at Union Chapel to conduct meetings and publicize the project. The team conducted focused stakeholder meetings and interviews early in the day of July 23 while members of the Project Team and Streetscape Committee staffed outreach tables at Healey Square and Oak Bluffs Avenue to publicize the project and collect public surveys.

In addition, members of the committee and team went door-to-door visiting downtown businesses. The information received helped to build the foundation for preparation of the conceptual master plan.

First Public Meeting - Listening Mode

The first public meeting was held the evening of July 23 at the Public Library to introduce the project, Streetscape Committee, and Consultant Team. The meeting was attended by approximately 50 members of the community. After an introductory “food for thought” presentation, small group breakout sessions were conducted to generate and capture discussion regarding perception of the study area, strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. Each small group presented findings, followed by a question and answer session.

The morning of July 24 the Project Team held a public open house at Union Chapel from 9:00-12:00 encouraging an informal public “drop-in” for conversation, additional public input, and continued publicizing of the project.

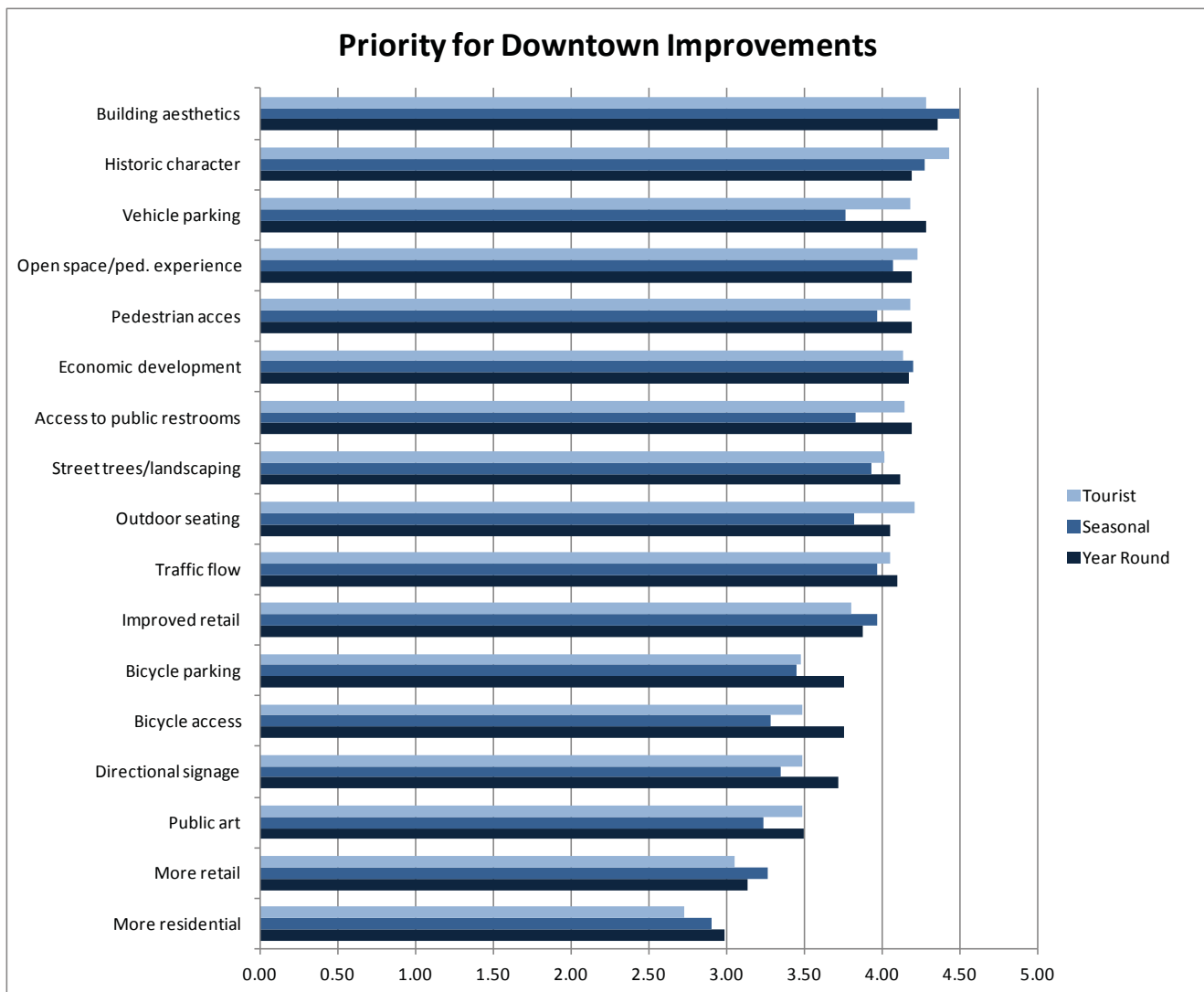
Robust community-wide conversation sustained throughout the project duration has been the most important element of the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan project, and will be a predictor of the long-term value of the Master Plan to the Town of Oak Bluffs. It is on this foundation that the plan’s success will rest. The Master Plan will succeed if it creates a broadly understood framework that facilitates communication, collaboration, and coordination among the plan’s many stakeholders over time.



July 23, 2014 Public Outreach

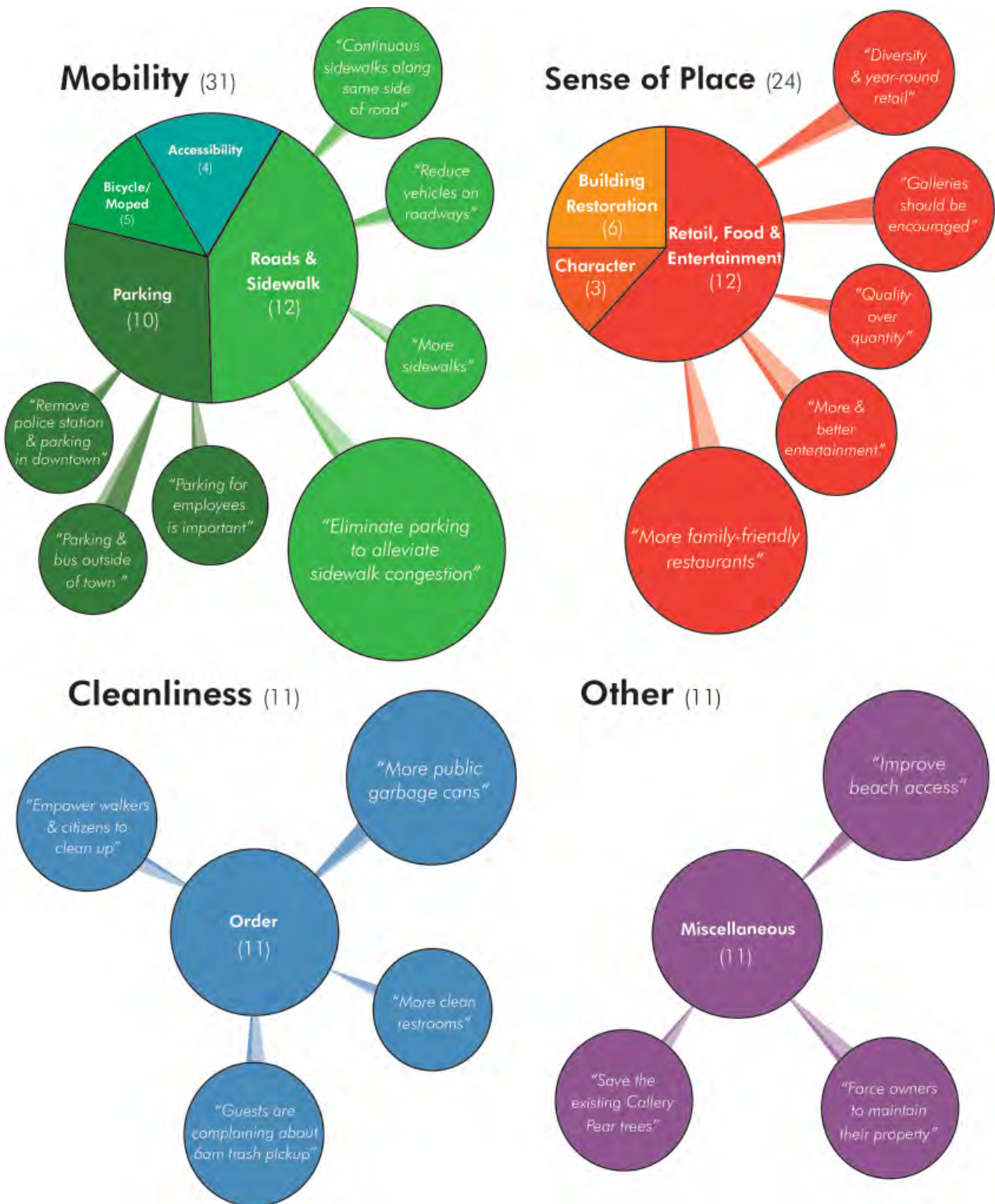


The results of the July 23 public small group table exercise were mapped and analyzed to identify trends. Connections to the water are clearly a special priority, including the existing harbor walk, fishing pier, and Ocean Park. The Camp Meeting Association and Reliable Market were identified as valued locations. Challenges include the Police Station, Circuit Avenue Extension and the North Bluff ferry connections, and the vacant theater buildings. Improvement of connections from Circuit Avenue to the CMA and strengthening of the SSA and North Bluff ferry experiences were consistently viewed as opportunities. Interestingly, both the “hub” at Circuit Avenue and Oak Bluffs Avenue as well as Healey Square are seen by the community simultaneously as assets, challenges, and opportunities.



Public Survey

At the outset of the project, a survey was developed to capture public information as an input into the visioning and design development process. The survey collected background demographics and focused on respondents' views of business district assets and concerns. The survey was available online and was distributed at public outreach events and via door-to-door canvassing. A total of 542 completed surveys were received and analyzed. The full survey response data is included in Appendix A.



Public Survey Question:
"What one or more improvements does Downtown need the most?"

Responses were collected and categorized by type.

Second Public Meeting - Concept Review

The second formal public meeting was held at the public library on May 5, 2015. The intent of public meeting #2 was to follow up the intensive public visioning phase of the project with draft design material, asking the question "Here's what we heard. Were we correct?"

A summary of outreach, public visioning, and the market/economic study was presented, followed by an in-depth interactive presentation and public discussion of the draft streetscape plan. The intent of the meeting was to present the seven consensus goals, and then discuss the draft concepts and designs illustrating projects, improvements, and initiatives within each goal.

Overall feedback was positive, with the following clear public input used to shape production of the final design concepts and implementation strategy:

1. Goal 1
 - a. Wayfinding, wayfinding, wayfinding
 - b. Minimize impact to Ocean Park (plaza and parking)
 - c. Don't move the bandstand
 - d. Include bicycle parking and wayfinding
5. Goal 2
 - a. positive support for Harbor Way concept
 - b. Simplify and clarify the North Bluff ferry/park concept
 - c. Balance logistics with addition of vibrant public space
 - d. Ensure loading access to Patriot Boat is maintained
3. Goal 3
 - a. Include Upper Circuit
 - b. Limit Circuit Ave parallel parking
 - c. Coordinate loading zones with proposed sidewalk expansion
 - d. Consensus for small plaza parklets at OB Avenue & Healey Square
 - e. Clarify the Circuit/Kennebec intersection concept

The intent of public meeting #2 was to follow the intensive public visioning phase of the project with draft design material, asking the question:

"Here's what we heard.
Were we correct?"

Consultants present Oak Bluffs Streetscape master plan

News by Barry Stringfellow May 6, 2015

Consensus on broad concepts sought at public meeting.



Consultants suggested numerous improvements to the harbor section of the North Bluff area of Oak Bluffs, which they described as a "gateway to the town." — Photo by Michael Cummo

There were few empty chairs but plenty of opinions Tuesday night in the Oak Bluffs library meeting room where consultants from Horsley Witten group presented their first draft of the downtown streetscape master plan to members of the Oak Bluffs Downtown Streetscape Committee (OBDSC), town officials, and members of the public.

Article in the Martha's Vineyard Times, 5/6/2015 by Barry Stringfellow



Various conceptual design alternatives