



**BLUEPRINT EASTHAMPTON
DISCOVERY WEEKEND REPORT**
10/23/2020 – 10/26/2020

Company Summary:

Our mission. Third Eye Network, LLC is an innovative multicultural marketing, management, and media consortium serving a diverse multisector clientele. Namely, the company has worked with government, economic development, nonprofit, higher education, philanthropic, small business, and arts and entertainment organizations. The company evolved into a marketing and management solutions boutique from a photography start-up between 2003 and 2008. Our national network of partners include ecosystem builders, software developers, business resource providers, creatives, community organizers, organizational coaches, and grantmakers.

Our founder. Dr. Lomax R. Campbell is the company's founding president and chief executive officer, bringing a broad skill set and a global, multicultural perspective. Dr. Campbell received Bachelor of Science and Executive Masters of Business Administration degrees from Rochester Institute of Technology. He earned a Doctor of Management degree from University of Maryland Global Campus where he researched the strategic importance of "cultural fit" between organizations and niche markets in 21st century nations. He also received a Certificate of Completion in Leading Economic Growth from Harvard Kennedy School of Government, Executive Education program.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Visitation Summary:

Purpose statement. Mayor Nicole LaChapelle of Easthampton, MA requested a comprehensive review of the underlying barriers to an inclusive economic development strategy. The onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic magnified known gaps in the City's ability to support existing businesses struggling to survive the pandemic, which includes assisting them with pivoting or adapting their business models. The City does not have a data collection system or common economic development language and resources for serving all types of businesses and their diverse owners. Additionally, many business sectors are siloed, resulting in lost opportunity for cross-sector growth and innovation.

Our approach. Our *discovery process* employs a cultural immersion strategy whereby formal and informal exchanges yield deep levels of engagement, facilitate authentic relationship building, and contextually-relevant insights. The process aims to clarify stakeholder interests, legitimacy, capabilities, capacities, motivations, and challenges with respect to clients' organizational priorities and goals. Disparate information sources are synthesized and used to generate possible alternatives (i.e., ideation) for taking relevant and meaningful action. They may subsequently choose to continue partnering with us to implement targeted or comprehensive projects and initiatives. Alternatively, they may opt to complete these activities in-house.

Discovery details. Our discovery weekend in Easthampton consisted of one-on-one conversations, small group meetings, exploring the City, site visits, and listening tour debriefs with more than 30 participants over 20 sessions. Participants spanned diverse priority stakeholder segments, including: City staff, seven city councilors, state representatives, local Black Lives Matter organizers, the Board of Assessors and realtors, engaged community members, higher education, economic developers, and the local business community. The sessions afforded rich insight for reflection and solution-building, which are summarized in the pages that follow.

Insights Summary:

Concerns and interests. There were a number of common discussion items that surfaced across stakeholder groups. Most of these manifested as concerns and/or interest in how the City proceeds with scoping alternatives capable of advancing its strategic priorities—especially in the midst of a pandemic. One of the earliest and pressing issues concerned housing affordability and displacement as gentrification impacts the City of Easthampton. While these concerns are well documented in the *City's 2008 Master Plan, 2019 Downtown Strategic Plan, and the 2020 Housing Needs and Production Plan*, the pandemic has exacerbated these concerns as they are now an urgent reality. In the former instance, people are relocating to Easthampton, while housing stock is being removed from the tax rolls in the latter instance. Rising housing costs are among the undesirable outcomes of this reality.

There were additional perspectives on gentrification effects including the need for public amenities (e.g., resource libraries, senior facilities, and parking), in addition to greater physical, social, and cultural connectivity. Organic increases in tourism seem to transpire around open space and the planning department purposely hired an arts and culture coordinator. Community-wide cultural events such as *Cultural Chaos, BookFest, WinterFest, Fall Festival, Arts Night Out, and Art in the Park* draw visitors from the Northeast Region. The increased exposure to Easthampton may stoke desires for visitors to relocate to the City. Since the pandemic began, property sales are showing families are relocating from the larger Northeast region. While the additional real estate activity is welcomed, the Mayor noted the City's population seems to hover

around 16,000, and a population over 17,000 could burden the City's physical footprint, configuration, and available resources.

General interest suggests transforming the City's economy by building upon its cultural legacy and identity as a "gritty" mill town. That said, alternatives for advancing community wealth building strategies should encompass ideating around the City's core. Historically, wealth building patterns relied on markets now in decline—agriculture, manufacturing and retail sales for large capital items. One respondent spoke passionately about the importance of art as an asset that should be leveraged as part of the City's economic growth agenda. This was particularly emphasized in conjunction with real estate development and activities falling under public works (e.g., aimed at increasing physical connectivity). Generational retention of land is declining as property values are climbing. Many of the families offloading their assets are in need of income resulting from job loss or the obsolescence for which their land was formerly used prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, attritions in land ownership has become the stopgap for depleted saving accounts.

Cultural conflict. Conflict, real and perceived, persists along cultural lines. The independent private school is perceived as lowering the tax levy because they are an educational non-profit. Thus, the school is seen as not paying their fair share. The school's acquisition of housing stock surrounding their facilities and the neighboring community are seen as a lack of social responsibility and commitment to the community at large. This conflicts with Easthampton's strong culture of collaboration and history of coming together, especially during hard times.

Other areas of cultural conflict seemed to occur along racial, ethnic, and generational lines. While arriving in the City from Northampton, we were informed about the City's history and the historical presence of small factions from White nationalist groups residing on the fringes of the City. While White nationalism seemed to represent the minority perspective, these ties continue to exist in pockets nevertheless. This was most observable while traveling to the local apple orchard to enjoy the public art on display as well as handmade refreshments, which seem to characterize the general spirit of the City (i.e., nature, art, and quality conversation among patrons over food). While in route, silent pro-Trump and anti-abortion protests peered from between the trees along roof lines and lawn signs. We learned flyers promoting neo-fascist ideologies have occasionally been found posted within the City's outskirts.

Another culturally-specific challenge concerned police and community relations. During our meeting with the local Black Lives Matter (BLM) group, we learned their members believed part of their role is to hold law enforcement accountable for their actions—particularly when institutional policies, protocols, and practices are misaligned with diverse community perspectives. Conversely, the police chief and his

officers believed their history reflected a positive and favorable reputation with the general community, but were uncertain of the reason for discord between their bureau and local BLM members. It seemed, despite their best efforts, relationship building between these groups is all but achievable. Across all institutional actors discussed (e.g., first responders, government, public and private education), structural and systemic racism seemed to be a material concern impacting quality of life for Black and Brown residents. Known instances of racial profiling and victim blaming were provided by community organizers and elected officials as examples in need of redress.

The final area of cultural conflict seemed to delineate along generational and geopolitical boundaries. Sentiments from homegrown residents of the “gritty” mill town culture tended to be concerned about the evolving landscape, influx of artisans, and cosmopolitan socialites arriving to the City from neighboring communities since the 1990s. New residents tended to be younger, college trained individuals and families seeking more affordable accommodations along with the range of possibilities developing within the City. Newcomers seemed to be concentrated in a few areas of the City with a median value of owner-occupied housing units of \$255,000 and a 60.9% owner-occupied housing unit rate according to 2015-2019 Census estimates.

Policy space. Conversations with elected officials and small business owners provided significant insights regarding the private sector and governmental policy. Top industries seemed to encompass healthcare; education; food and novelty retail; manufacturing and the trades (e.g., precision machining); and professional, technical, and scientific services. A few developers were reported to own the majority of the old mills and provided an array of possibilities for new ventures to spring forth from their repurposed structures. These included a glassblowing business, bar and grills, a ping pong recreational space, professional contractors, a saltwater float center, and an indoor park, to name a few. Despite these advancements, we were informed the City did not have a working relationship with one large employer located in the mills. While based in Easthampton, they were not an engaged corporate citizen.

Tensions seemed to exist as a larger new public school was under construction that added another 22% to the tax rate. While sightseeing, challenges associated with one of the City’s cannabis licenses was described as a missed opportunity by the state to embed a racial equity lens into the policy. It was stated that state social equity and economic empowerment policies are “toothless,” calling for state-level advocacy and organizing through regional economic agencies and the state elected delegation. Mayor LaChapelle later mentioned the development of that particular corridor, Route 10, was high on her wish list due to its potential economic benefits for the City.

Learning and development. In our early conversations, Mayor LaChapelle expressed an interest in establishing an office within the Mayor’s Office and identifying

a director to lead *Blueprint Easthampton*. A critical opportunity for the cultivation of the role and staff includes coaching, advising, and training support to incorporate community wealth building principles and a racial equity lens into the work. Nationally, Black and Brown communities have disproportionately bore the brunt of the effects stemming from the pandemic, dramatically compounding well-documented disparities and differential outcomes. Moreover, the effects have manifested along intersectional conditions and identities (i.e., class, ability, age, foreign-born residents, etc.). The competencies, know-how, and experience required to navigate the environment delineated above are not prevalent within municipal government and the community, so organizational learning and capacity building will be critical to the success of the initiative. The Mayor sees equitable microenterprise and small business development crucial to post-COVID-19 recovery.

DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Recommendations Summary:

Strategy overview. A number of meaningful courses of action have been identified and should be prioritized amid and after the COVID-19 pandemic is under control. The following pages outline the most prevalent alternatives based on the *Insights Summary* that should be pursued with respect to the City's overarching goals. The first category of recommended activities set the stage for the others. From our conversations, it was revealed the City's *Master Plan* was outdated, with a time horizon of 2008 to 2018. This provides opportunities for memorializing *Blueprint Easthampton's* priority areas in an updated master plan for the City, in addition to relevant regional plans and priorities. Identity development would be a second strategy focused on bringing the community together. Simultaneously bolstering support for microenterprise, procurement, and retail attraction presents a third option for spurring equitable growth for the City. Improving police and community relations are a fourth area worthy of attention for easing tensions and promoting career pathways in law enforcement. The fifth and final strategy should advance affordable housing and community building strategies engendering community wealth building (e.g., asset building, quality of life, living wage jobs, and generational progress) in addition to creating new revenue streams for sustaining City operations. These alternatives should be formalized via public service agreements and approved charters—with detailed scopes of work and action plans, given stakeholder requirements and constraints.

Regional alignment. Planning is an essential component of the *Blueprint Easthampton* initiative, because its success first hinges on its ability to effectively engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Second, it will be shaped by the City's ability to attract/retain collaborators and investments at all levels of the system from individual households to state-level actors along the so-called *Knowledge Corridor*

along Interstate 91. Strategy is about choices. Aligning the City's forthcoming master and subordinate strategic-operating plans and activities with more regional plans can well-position Easthampton for shared growth and prosperity. This includes aligning efforts with "the Hamptons," Pioneer Valley, Western Massachusetts, and the Knowledge Corridor, as warranted. Within these economic development catchments, Easthampton would need to determine its "fit" among its peer communities, assuming a visionary leadership role where possible.

Valley Community Development Corporation and the National League of Cities have a growing presence in the City and can leverage regional resources to implement targeted programming that support informal entrepreneurs. The City should pursue additional state grants to develop the commercial corridor along Route 10 and housing development initiatives. The City should also partner with Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) for federal and state grants that support grassroots economic development. Existing regional plans are outdated and must be inclusive of ongoing and post-COVID-19 socio-cultural, economic, and housing data. These include the *2015 Plan for Progress*: <http://www.pvpc.org/plans/plan-for-progress> (page), and http://www.pvpc.org/sites/default/files/PFP_2015_Final_Adjusted_web.pdf (report). Finally, the City should engage relational assets with the Massachusetts Federal Delegation to garner buy-in and influence.

Regarding time horizons, we recommend a 15-year time horizon for the master plan, given the size of the City's administrative staff and available resources. This would also allow for the implementation of strategic plans that roll in 3-year increments, operationalizing targeted priorities under the master plan. Some of the operational priorities should include knowledge retention and sustainability of City personnel and councilors by right-sizing compensation, launching a community investment fund, and transitioning "Blueprint Easthampton" into a nonprofit structure in the long-run. Preparation of these documents should employ community co-creation methods and leverage area graduate students through relevant capstone projects.

Marketing strategies. To bring the diverse community segments together, the City should launch a longitudinal campaign under the theme, "We are Easthampton." This subordinate campaign of the broader Blueprint Easthampton initiative would serve to empower all community constituents to collectively redefine what it means to be an "Easthamptonite." Centering the City of Easthampton, such a community-based campaign could honor its "gritty" mill town legacy, the emerging artisan culture, and increasingly diverse community. Through the joint branding of "the Hamptons," the City could collaborate with its municipal peers to cultivate a shared destiny under a "better together" mindset. Beyond alignment, the City should work to actualize its priorities within the context of PVPC's Regional Economic Development Plan, at the appropriate tables.

Urban entrepreneurship. The need for community wealth building was/is the catalyst for our work in Easthampton. Mayor LaChapelle's team was preparing for the launch of the *Blueprint Easthampton Resource Navigator* by the time our discovery weekend was conceived. However, the pandemic has accelerated the need for a more robust *ESHIP*, or entrepreneurship, strategy. Government shutdowns have crippled economic activity, resulting in job loss, business closures, and other secondary effects. Cultivating local retail, microenterprise, small batch manufacturing, and urban farming can activate inclusive recovery and equitable growth for the City. We have fostered complementary relationships with a variety of inter-national resource providers that cater to all phases and stages of the business development lifecycle. This includes those who specialize in pre-launch activities and informal entrepreneurship during *Start Up* (e.g., Rising Tide Capital's Community Business Academy, and Kauffman's FastTrac and 1 Million Cups); capital access, retail activation, and culturally-relevant ecosystem building activities during *Stay Up* (e.g., Next Street's integrated capital solutions and assistance toolkits, Klose Buy's digital marketing and customer loyalty program, and Niche Market Insights Foundation's forthcoming LocalBOBs—Black-Owned-Business —and Latinx support platforms); and state certification, contracting, and supplier diversity activities during *Scale Up* (e.g., Qwally's inclusive procurement solutions).

We learned Cottage Street is an important retail district for Easthampton. We also learned the City seeks to pursue the development of a new one-stop-shop offering technical assistance under the Department of Housing and Community Development's Massachusetts Downtown Initiative grant program. Winners will be announced in the first quarter of 2021. This effort would enhance the City's emerging entrepreneurial ecosystem. We are exploring the process for being added to Massachusetts's state approved vendors list in order to assist with Easthampton's efforts to collaborate across the system. Other targeted entrepreneurial support opportunities include exploring food empowerment strategies for residents and *foodpreneurs* (i.e., defined by Foodpreneur Institute as small-batch food producers) and promoting *cannabiz* (i.e., for which The People's Dispensary offers a phenomenal equity-based franchise model).

Police–community relations. Conversations with law enforcement, local BLM members, one city councilor, and a criminal justice professor inspired what aims to be a holistic five-point strategy for improving police and community relations. The first aspect would be to engage in activities that celebrate the unique identity and context of Easthampton Police Department in contrast to the realities and dynamics that exist in other communities throughout the state and nationally. Publish budget and personnel data publicly and collaborate with the Community Relations Committee to outline a desired cultural end state between law enforcement and the community.

The second consideration involves creating more spaces and opportunities for relationship building. Beyond surface-level engagement, it can promote community education, racial healing, and culture sharing. To institutionalize these activities, the bureau can collaborate with City planning and communications personnel to develop a yearlong community calendar indexing cultural phenomena and activities transpiring each month and season. These can be disaggregated by culture/identity segments to inform deeper levels of ongoing engagement.

The third element focuses on leveraging relationship building and strategic resource allocations to support the police bureau and officers with striving towards becoming culturally competent. Ongoing training, employee resource groups, self-help resources, and counseling should be available for law enforcement officers on and off the frontlines. This point requires institutional commitment and intentional structural adaptations for garnering and embracing cultural knowledge capable of broadening individual and institutional perspectives over time. We highly recommend partnering with our national resource partner known as the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, a 40-year-old international collective of over 100 anti-racist, multicultural community organizers and educators dedicated to building an effective movement for social transformation. Their Undoing Racism® Community Organizing Workshop is truly unparalleled.

Along the lines of guiding organizational culture change, the fourth issue would entail the adoption of antiracist organizing principles within and beyond the bureau. This includes extolling the principles and rethinking policies, practices, procedures, and structures in order to increase their level of congruence with community needs and interests. Similar to the second pillar of the strategy, this aspect can play a significant role in shifting the power through transparency and collaboration between law enforcement and the community. Examples include learning from the past, establishing a police accountability board, and recognizing local organizers and coalitions as relevant partners in the work of keeping the City of Easthampton safe and vibrant.

The final component of this strategy regards the development and promotion of middle-skills career pathways for first responders that provide living wage employment opportunities. These should not be restricted to law enforcement, but also firefighters, paramedics, and emergency medical technicians. In addition, related career pathways might include essential high-skill technical and professional opportunities that exist aside from the frontlines. Our discussion with Holyoke Community College's criminal justice department chairperson suggested some career pathway promotional activities have already developed organically where Latinx enrollments has reached an impressive 30%. Attracting these graduates to the City for employment is necessary.

Affordable housing. As previously noted, housing insecurity was a recurring theme during our discovery weekend. Stable housing is critical to community wealth

building and generational progress. During our tour of the City, the city planner provided us with a great deal of local perspective on housing in Easthampton. Opportunities for establishing affordable housing includes repurposing old school facilities. Recent community input has revealed possibilities for senior living, rent control, income-based options, and public amenities. Tiny homes and mobile home parks were also lifted up during our discussions. Similar sentiments were discussed pertaining to affordable living in the Mills. However, competing interests of the business community desire additional parking over affordable housing and community resources. There seems to be enough structures for a mix of these approaches.

We also discussed prospects for a progressive development project involving the co-creation of an integrated home-buyer assistance and home-sharing services model. Derived from existing first-time home buyer programs, the program could encourage the acquisition of double and small multi-unit properties. The program would promote asset building and provide an attractive alternative to traditional lodging and accommodations currently offered outside of Easthampton. Conceptually, it would feature an apartment, guesthouse, and room rental cooperative administered through a government sponsored home-sharing site. This hybrid approach could adhere to higher quality standards than the evolving unregulated home-sharing landscape, since it would be subject to state and/or local lodging laws. The Professional Association of Innkeepers International, a marketing organization for the bed and breakfast industry, may be an essential resource for proceeding with such an endeavor.

Community building. Building human connection and capacities outside of policing and the justice systems was another central idea during our visit. Community building occurs at individual, family-group, neighborhood, and city levels. Organic approaches include incentivizing community members to organize new and existing community events. Alternatives can include scarecrow competitions, BBQ and rib festivals, a Manhan Rail Trail relay race, man-scamper hunts, paddle boat competitions, educational assemblies, and wealth rallies. Engaging community members in the rebranding of the City as a patchwork of perspectives can deepen feelings of belonging and broaden participation. A vital component for community building is the development of a community neighborhoods map. This should also be co-created with the community. This would allow municipal actors, developers, and other groups to recognize the hyperlocal identities that seemed to have formed in some areas of the City while others are yet to emerge. Examples of informally recognized communities include Cottage Street, the Mills, Treehouse, and Mount Tom.

Environmental justice is another area for fostering community building and promoting sustainability. This recommendation incorporates the natural and built environment and has the potential to address poverty in meaningful ways. City planning staff seeks to improve physical connectivity of the City and community assets. Another possibility entails leveraging the Knowledge Corridor and regional train

system to stimulate economic activity for business and residential travelers. This strategy presents opportunities for community building through public-private partnerships and marketing the City as a destination for its natural resources, retail boutiques, and various cultural attractions.

There also seemed to be a lot of latitude for more intimate levels of community building, such as marketing the trades and apprenticeship programs as viable career pathways capable of mitigating growing affordability concerns. Organizing periodic Undoing Racism® Workshops would equip residents with a common lens and the tools required to do their part in not only centering their needs and interests, but ensuring Easthampton remains a desirable place to live, work, pray, and play. With respect to the City's community policing model, the police chief stated, "this is a marriage that has to work...the community is the police, and the police is the community." So, the responsibility for learning and development should not solely occur among City staff and law enforcement. Ongoing community education is paramount. Another skill building vehicle includes the adoption of public service programs like Cities for Financial Empowerment Funds' Financial Empowerment Centers (FEC). The program provides free personalized community-based financial counseling services, meeting individual business and community members where they are. By design, FEC counselors assist center participants with the achievement of diverse outcomes under four broad programmatic goal areas: Access to safe and affordable banking services, increasing savings, debt alleviation, and credit repair.

Organizational learning. Employee development is also critical to the success of Blueprint Easthampton. During our early conversations with Mayor LaChapelle, we recommended asking City personnel about their level of interest in learning and obtaining new skills and credentials associated with their work. We believe happy and engaged employees contribute to the quality of work life, organizational climate, and stakeholder satisfaction (e.g., funders, employees, customers-constituents, etc.). Individual and group capacity building should entail coaching, advising, and technical assistance, specialized certification training (e.g., project management, change management, process improvement, facilitation, etc.). Workshops on relevant topics and training resources (e.g., environmental scanning, community wealth building, organizational stress management, etc.) should be available for employees as needed. In addition, resources should be developed or adapted to facilitate operations and mitigate organizational stress. Necessary resources can include tools, templates, forms, books, multimedia, and role modeling to increase adoption and growth.