

# Highlights from Pre-Meeting Session of Weaver Street Market's Board of Directors and WSM Owners

February 2013

Meeting

*Board Pre-Meeting, Carrboro Century Center, Carrboro, NC on February 13, 2013, 6:15 pm to 7:30 pm*

## Board Pre-Meeting Session on WSM 2020 Goal 3: Invigorate Downtowns

At its February pre-meeting WSM's Board of Directors met with owners and a local community expert to discuss **Goal 3: Invigorate downtowns**. This goal reflects the unique contribution WSM makes to invigorating the heart of our community. A "vibrant, sustainable commercial center" became part of WSM mission statement in 2000. The Goal 3 Conversation built upon more than 300 ideas from co-op owners and employees. Input for this goal also came from other sources, including WSM's experience of last 10 years, what's been learned from other co-ops and downtown groups, and what's been studied and reported in works such as *Walkable City* –by Jeff Speck.

Three themes emerged:

- Increasing WSM vibrancy
- Expanding the mix of downtown services
- WSM stores in additional downtowns

For each of these areas, General Manager Ruffin Slater identified successes WSM has already achieved, the impact of those successes on local communities and the local economy, and steps for future strategies that will create the most impact. For example, the impact of the indoor cafes, outdoor gathering spaces, and events was described as playing an immense role in the vibrancy of downtown Carrboro. The impact of WSM's newer stores was described as "substantial," with 8,000 customers per week in Southern Village and Hillsborough (in addition to 16,000 in Carrboro each week).

In terms of future strategy, the first priority is to fine tune existing operations. This includes remodeling the Carrboro store this summer, improving the grounds of the Hillsborough and Southern Village stores, having more outdoor events, developing a mobile kitchen trailer, supporting complimentary food-related businesses, owning our own buildings, and developing a financial plan for minimizing risk and maximizing community investment.

Other Triangle downtowns have approached WSM about having a co-op grocery in their downtowns. The GM observed that WSM is building the capacity to respond to these requests and has a general goal of opening the same number of new locations as it did last decade. Rather than focusing on a particular location, WSM is working to establish criteria for new store locations in order to be able to evaluate opportunities that come up. The GM stressed that WSM only grows at the rate the community supports what we are doing and has many built in governors to growth including Board policies to avoid financial risk. The GM also stressed the importance of clear communications about considering new stores, and pointed out that some information such as real estate negotiations would necessarily remain confidential.

Meg McGurk, Executive Director of the Chapel Hill Downtown Partnership (CHDP), spoke about what makes downtowns like Chapel Hill successful. She described CHDP as wanting a downtown where people "live, work, play, walk, bike, bus." Diversity was one of the critical components she identified for achieving this vision: diversity of people, diversity of space, and diversity of retail. She suggested that

Chapel Hill needed diversity of retail more than anything. Two aims CHDP hope to achieve are more downtown workers and more residency. Meg suggested that more families, more kids, and more green space are vital for vibrant downtowns. She also observed that WSM's green space is considered a benchmark for developers.

Consumer owners and worker owners attending the meeting shared their perspectives on Goal 3 and offered suggestions for the Board and management to consider as they develop plans to move forward with Goal 3. Some concerns were also voiced. Five themes ran throughout the conversation:

- The importance of developing a set of site selection criteria to assess such factors as the potential of the location to become a vibrant downtown, the potential for a sales level that would make the store sustainable, and the willingness of the community to invest in the store.
- A desire to better understand how an increased economy of scale will further our mission and goals, including our goal of providing healthy food to more people and driving the growth of local farms and producers.
- The critical requirement of having all Food House processes and systems running optimally and positioned for the increased demand in production and delivery.
- The need for greater clarity on the ability of the co-op to expand to meet needs of other communities without taking away from places where we're already meeting needs.
- The need for more information about costs for opening new stores, timing, and the source of the funding, as well as information about other alternatives that are being considered for invigorating downtowns.