

Dear Lexington Citizen,

In good times, communities hum along. Services are delivered, schools are working, and all is well. It's in the tough times, when interests collide, that communities can break apart.

Maintaining a thriving community takes work. Whipsawed by the vagaries of markets and demographics, a community can be thriving one minute and thrown into chaos the next. Taxes, budgets, overrides, development, schools, trash collection, mismanagement—all can rock the very foundation of any town. When communities function well, weather the storms of change, remain solvent, adapt, and continue to grow, it is an accomplishment.

A Sense of Community

This year Lexington 20/20 Vision, a longstanding committee of the Lexington Select Board (known as the Board of Selectmen at the time), celebrated a virtual anniversary with its Futures Panel on Zoom.

A little over twenty years ago, it is safe to say that the founders of 20/20 Vision had no idea that it would come to maturity amid a global pandemic. Members, some who have been with the process for over twenty years, were not deterred. It was just a bump in the road, a problem to be addressed and solved. In true 20/20 Vision spirit, the forum went on as planned. *Watch it here - lexingtonma.gov/futurespanel*

I wouldn't be surprised if you haven't heard about 20/20 Vision, or don't fully appreciate how vital the work of this Committee has been to the evolution of Lexington. Here's an opportunity to take a deep dive.

By Laurie Atwater



LEXINGTON'S CITIZEN-LED, LONG-TERM PLANNING PROCESS COMES OF AGE

June 5, 1999 - Dear Lexington Citizen, How's Your Vision?

After almost a decade of budget overrides—often divisive and combative—the community fabric was showing a little wear in Lexington. Issues around school enrollment, the rising cost of employee healthcare, special education costs and much-needed school construction loomed large.

It was in 1998, in the midst of these battles that an Initiating Committee was appointed through the combined efforts of the Select Board, the School Committee and the Planning Board to develop a town-wide strategic planning and goal-setting process looking forward to the year 2020. The process was to build on a series of outreach efforts that had been carried out in the previous five years including a survey, a series of community conversations led by consultants from the COLLABORATIVE in Boston, and focus groups.

The Initiating Committee later broke down into two subcommittees: the Citizen Participation Subcommittee and the Process Design Subcommittee. Candy McLaughlin, Assistant to the Town Manager was appointed Project Manager. Many of these people including McLaughlin have stayed with 20/20 Vision for over twenty years. I interviewed three founding members: Peter Enrich, Peter Lee, and Fernando Quezada for this story.

The first order of business for the Committee—give the project a name and develop a logo. They called it Lexington 20/20 Vision.

Peter Lee remembers it well, “I thought that was a lot of fun.” Peter has a background in marketing, so he was excited to develop a logo for 20/20 Vision. We were kicking it around and trying to think about perfect vision, and the future—back then 2020 seemed so far away! One of the early draft logos was to have the Minuteman statue holding

binoculars!” That one didn't stick, but the concept of bringing something that is far away into focus is appropriate! By September of 2000, working groups had completed their work in five topic areas and developed “vision statements” for each. A Core Participants Group (CPG), acting as a steering group for the process, synthesized the visions into one town-wide vision statement for 2020. You can read it (see sidebar right) and see for yourself how well it is holding up now that 2020 is here.

Inclusive, Rigorous, and Objective

At its core, 20/20 Vision is a community-building tool—a way to involve citizens in important decisions, to build social connections and networks, and bring different points of view to the table. It is a forward-looking planning process continually working in the background to anticipate issues, invite collaboration, and provide guidance to the town in the form of well-researched reports with specific recommendations. At the core of 20/20 Vision is the process itself: inclusive, rigorous, and objective.

Topics for 20/20 Vision have come from town officials and from citizens themselves through survey tools mailed out into the community and delivered online. Sometimes the Committee is reacting to something happening on the ground (overrides, the issue of rampant mansionization, commercial development); other times, they are analyzing emerging trends (the growth in the Asian population over the past decade). In every instance, they reach out to citizens, seek new voices, balance interests, and hope to align their recommendations with shared values as the town evolves.

How's Your Vision?

It is often a tough balancing act, and can be necessarily slow. The rubber regularly meets the road when it comes to spending town resources. Budgets are a reflection of values, and when values are not broadly shared, when conflicts arise and resources are limited, divisiveness can boil over and become toxic. Engaging the entire community, with all of its factions, into the process of value-formation is vital for community cohesion, especially when there are competing interests and trade-offs to be made.

At its best, 20/20 Vision reaches out to a representative constituency of citizens and invites participation from anyone interested in decisions facing the town. Like any democratic process, 20/20 is only as representative as those who participate. Though every effort is made to identify partisanship and special interests, volunteerism itself can generate biases. 20/20 Vision has sought to fight against that by encouraging broad engagement and generating reliable data for objective analysis.

The process helps to create trust in the fairness of governance, and a “sense of community.” This is why many of 20/20 Vision’s projects center on citizen involvement and how the town can better communicate with its residents. Engagement and communication are key in times of change and upheaval.

Three Town Managers have supported the work of the Committee: former Town Managers Rick White and Carl Valente, and now Jim Malloy steps in.

To achieve the broadest view of town sentiment, the 20/20 Vision committee goes out to the entire community every five years at minimum or more if necessary with surveys and focus groups. Over the years, they have also held community forums and hosted speakers. Using this data and direction from the Select Board and Town Manager, they formulate new initiatives and provide progress reports along the way. The most recent survey was conducted in 2017 and was overseen by Lexington resident Marian Cohen who has assisted 20/20 with survey development and

reporting since the beginning. Ryan is the Director of the Center for Social Research at Framingham State.

As 20/20 Vision developed over time, the data became more and more critical to the process. Fernando Quezada said, “I think the biggest evolution [for 20/20 Vision] was our increased attention to empirical data—turning to instruments that we could measure. Marion Cohen was very fundamental to that. She was able to perform these surveys. It was empirical. We were often surprised at the information. It’s one thing to do focus groups, which we started out doing lots of, but to have quantitative survey data and be able to do cross-tabulations was invaluable to learn not only what residents want, but what are they willing to pay for. Because the answer is always going to be ‘yes’ on the question of, ‘do you want better education, or to sustain the quality of excellent education?’ But then you ask the question, ‘are you willing for taxes to increase to maintain the quality of education?’ and you see some differences in responses.”

Lexington’s Citizen Volunteers

Peter Enrich, Lexington resident, former Selectman, and professor of law at Northeastern University, has also been with 20/20 Vision since its inception. “One of the things I’ve always treasured about Lexington,” Peter said, “is the degree to which things are done by volunteers, the extent to which decision-making, planning, visioning, is all done in a way that really draws on the community at large, not just on the professionals who have the expertise.”

Enrich commented, “As part of the 20/20 process, I don’t want to be pushing my own agenda. I want to be making sure that we hear the full range of voices; it creates a level of community engagement.”

Over the years, the 20/20 Vision committee has addressed many matters facing Lexington: economic vitality, affordable housing, “mansionization,” economic development, financial management and stability, civic discourse, and inclusion of diverse

ethnic groups, and improving the town’s communication systems.

Working groups deploy to take a deep dive into any of these topics, reach out to the public, solicit feedback from professionals, work with consultants and compile the results into reports that provide as guidance for the Select Board and town administrators.

The town has enacted many 20/20 Vision recommendations. One example is Lexington’s Citizen’s Academy. The 20/20 Vision Committee recommended and supported the development of the Citizens’ Academy, which helps residents to understand local government and learn about becoming involved. Many graduates of the Academy have moved into valuable leadership roles in town governance. The first class graduated in 2009, and new classes are conducted each fall.

Balancing Conflicting Ideas and Goals

Some 20/20 Vision efforts have proved complicated and vexing. In 2008, the 20/20 Vision Economic Development Task Force studied and provided guidance to the town on three opportunities for commercial development: Hartwell Avenue, Spring Street, and Forbes Road. The goal was to assess opportunities for commercial revenue in Lexington to supplement residential taxes, and thereby, curb residential tax increases. However, over a decade later, tension remains about increased commercial activity.

The work on economic development feels like it is perpetually in limbo, but progress has been made steadily over the years. A large cadre of stakeholders: residents, landlords, businesses local and state government makes it challenging. Issues of land management, traffic, and transportation are complicated. Consultants have weighed-in intermittently. Community sentiment has begun to bend favorably toward increasing the commercial base. In the 2017 20/20

20/20 VISION - Continued on page 30

**LIKE ANY
DEMOCRATIC
PROCESS,
20/20 VISION
IS ONLY AS
REPRESENTATIVE
AS THOSE WHO
PARTICIPATE.**

Lexington 2020 Vision Town-Wide Vision Statement (Written in 2000 as if in the year 2020)

The Town of Lexington prides itself on being a great place to live.

Residents and visitors alike characterize it as a vibrant and active community, which places a high value on learning at all ages. Its residents and employees welcome the diversity of people who are attracted to Lexington and choose to call it their home and/or place of employment.

Lexington is, and will stay, a primarily residential community with a tradition of offering quality, broad-reaching municipal services. It is committed to preserving and maintaining a sense of community that includes its historic tradition, its public and private open spaces, and its public support for civic life. It strives, however, to maintain a range of affordability. Residents recognize that these qualities are always difficult to balance.

An open and structured process of community conversation and long-term planning help the town remain forward-looking. Major elements, which are consistently addressed and evaluated, include: fiscal responsibility sustainability of natural and human resources; transportation issues; education, and regional cooperation and integration. Residents are invested in and rely on this process as they reconcile competing needs and interests.

Vision survey, 53.9 percent of respondents indicated that expanding the commercial tax base was “extremely” or “very” important to them.

Issues of growth have consistently been a challenge for Lexington as it seeks to maintain its green space, and “leafy” feel while maintaining diversity and affordability. Years ago, town fathers rejected what became the Burlington Mall. That stretch became Raytheon, then Patriot Partners, and SHIRE, (which is now Takeda). Now, Hartwell North is poised for re-zoning and redevelopment with agreement between stakeholders including landlords, the town and state; Town Meeting approved funding of a traffic study last year. Through each of these steps, 20/20 Vision has provided background support.

“I think economic development is one [of the areas] that there are conflicting voices, and I think we’ve made progress. Peter Enrich said. “I don’t think we’ve made as much progress as there is room to make. I think it’s going to be a continuing effort.”

He stressed that the job of 20/20 Vision is not to resolve these areas of conflict, but to bring the information forward to the town leadership and the community as a whole. He said, “I think the work that we did very early on—getting the town more focused on economic development, how to hire an economic development officer, long-range fiscal management and setting up stabilization funds and mechanisms—has made Lexington finances remarkably stable compared to other communities. We brought a bunch of voices to the table, then Carl [Valente] set up a committee that was focused just on those issues, but it drew on several on us who had come from the 20/20 process, and I think that has played out in valuable ways for the town.”

“I do understand people who are more concerned about the quality of life, and traffic, and the environment than about a strong commercial base for the town. And I don’t know if some of the same people then complain about their tax bills,” Enrich concluded.

Demographic Change

Over the past decade 20/20 Vision has focused intensely on demographic changes in the Town of Lexington, specifically the growing population of residents with Asian backgrounds (Asian defined broadly as people with Chinese, Korean and Indian ancestry). Former Town Manager Carl Valente was an early proponent of this work along with the Select Board. They understood that inclusion of this growing group of residents would be critical to the future stability and cohesion of the Lexington community.

Dan Krupka is the current Chair of the 20/20 Vision Committee. I talked with him recently at his Lexington home, and his enthusiasm for the topic is contagious. “We started looking at census data, and we saw this rapidly growing Asian population in Lexington,” he explained. “We broke down the data and conducted interviews in key segments. We asked ourselves, ‘Are these residents involved in town affairs? And, if not, why not?’”

The Demographic Change Task Force released its first report in 2010. It looked at many dimensions of the Asian population in Lexington: what attracted new residents to Lexington, what they liked more or less about the community and what they would like to see in the future. The Task Force explored barriers and opportunities for new minority residents to engage with the many voluntary boards and committees in Lexington, seeing engagement to be of paramount importance for successful integration into the fabric of Lexington life.

They found that civic participation outside of the schools was low (about 3.3% in 2010). Dan explained, “We wanted to understand why, so we interviewed members of the Asian community in town who were already town meeting members or involved in various community activities to understand why there wasn’t greater involvement.”

The answer boiled down to a couple of things, according to Dan, “The demographics of the Asian community is very skewed between younger working couples with kids in school and older people who don’t speak English well or at all.” Dan explained that most commu-

nities rely on older, generally retired individuals for volunteerism, but that is difficult when there is a significant language barrier. Young professional couples are in a time crunch that often precludes participation in much other than school activities and the cultural and religious activities they choose for their families.

Dan says identifying this problem allowed them to make recommendations for outreach and engagement with cultural groups like the Chinese American Association of Lexington (CAAL), and Indian Americans of Lexington (IAL), and KoLex (Korean-American Organization of Lexington).

The Push/Pull Strategy

The Subcommittee on Demographic Change was charged with following up on the 20/20 Vision recommendations. It was a proactive effort with a push/pull strategy: town boards and organizations like Cary Library and the Lexington Historical Society would reach out to the Asian community to pull people in to town service when there were vacancies or opportunities, and organizations like CAAL, IAL and KoLex would “push” their membership to participate on boards and committees, mentor new candidates and promote cultural exchange.

At the time, Peter Lee was President of CAAL as well as a member of 20/20 Vision. He explained in a recent phone call that the initial 20/20 Vision diversity efforts occurred when CAAL was organizing to become a 503C nonprofit. The timing was good. CAAL was becoming more organized and more involved in the community. Still, reaching into the CAAL community proved challenging, he said, because people from China weren’t used to participating as volunteers. “Recent immigrants can be kind of shy, or reluctant to participate because they think, ‘My English isn’t that good, or in China, we didn’t volunteer for anything,’” Peter explained. They often had misconceptions about the amount of time it would take to participate in Town Meeting and thought that their participation would not be valued. Peter said that the schools provided a good proving ground for volunteerism. If there was a demand for boards and committees within the schools, Asian parents could volunteer and feel comfortable. It was a win-win all around.

Peter, who was a Town Meeting member himself, said, “People were always reluctant to get involved at first, but I would tell them that we were voting on important things—open space, affordable housing, parks, and recreation. Things you care about.” Noting that is a work in progress, he is however, encouraged by the increases in participation over the years as CAAL has continued to grow.

Encouraging Participation

Nirmala Giramella was an early participant also. As an Indian-American resident and founder of IAL, Nirmala was well-positioned to understand the many issues facing new Asian residents, and her perspective was invaluable. I spoke with Nirmala by phone.

“Back then, we got together every year, had a Diwali party, a cultural dance, and that was fine for a while,” she said. “And then sometime later on, there was this whole idea about let’s get involved a little bit more in the town affairs.” At the time, Nirmala was volunteering at the high school on the PTO board and with Lexington Education Foundation (LEF).

“So the first thing we did was put some money away from our Diwali ticket sales, and we donated it to the food pantry in Lexington. We gave maybe a thousand dollars, and that’s the first civic involvement that we started doing as a group. And the purpose was to make our own community aware that we’ve come here, we’ve been long enough living here, we’ve all been doing really well in our lives, how about we try to have more civic participation within the town. This is the town we live in; we love it, our kids are going into the school system, let’s try to give back to our local community.”

Nirmala said, “It was at the time that Dan approached me saying that, we know you are leading the Indian Americans of Lexington, and we are trying to create this Subcommittee for 2020, and we would like you to be part of it. Dan was trying to bring people in from each community.”

Nirmala felt valued and welcomed as a part of the 20/20 Vision Committee. “I thought Lexington was visionary in that sense. I had never heard of any other town doing any kind of a study like this. And for the town to start thinking about

this ahead of time, and just noticing these things, I thought that was really good. I felt it showed that the town is very participatory and is willing to look at the diversity of and how enriching it can be for all of us. And so for me, I thought it was a very important effort and initiative that they took.”

Nirmala feels that the recommendations of the Task force and the follow-on activities undertaken by the town have created a noticeably successful outcome. “If you look at the number of town meeting members, especially in the Indian-American community, it’s exponential,” she said. Indeed, looking at the 2015 progress report by the Diversity Task Force, participation among all Asians in Lexington had grown from 4.3 to 7.7 percent on elected bodies in Lexington. Participation on PTA/PTO Boards skyrocketed to 24.2 percent.

In a satisfying turn, after 2009 many residents were able to attend the Lexington Citizen’s Academy. It has proved to be a powerful way to introduce new Lexingtonians to the functioning of the town and provide a pathway to participation and leadership.

Promoting Cultural Inclusion

“So now, you’ve got broader participation in town meeting,” Dan Krupka said, “But, do you have Indian or Chinese friends that you socialize with?” 20/20 Vision identified this as a new phase of the diversity project—cultural inclusion.

Fernando Quezada sees this as a significant challenge for the community. Quezada has served on the Lexington 20/20 Vision Committee since the very beginning. It was his signature that appeared on the 1999 letter asking the question, “How’s your vision?” It seems he is still on a 20/20 vision quest.

“When we’re talking ethnic minorities and various nationalities coming in, all of a sudden, we’re talking value creation, culture creation,” he explained.

“So, when people first come to Lexington to live, what are the values of the community they experience? What is Lexington? What is the culture that the town communicates to its residents?” He reflected on the increased represen-

tation of Asians over the years, acknowledging success, but he said there is a way to go. “The question has to do with the nature of the exchanges, and the nature of the social intercourse. And to that extent, groups do still stick very much to themselves.”

In 2015 the Subcommittee on Asian Communities was formed. Lexington’s three Asian community organizations were represented along with five at-large members and two members of the Lexington 20/20 Vision Committee. The Subcommittee identified benchmark communities in California and New Jersey that are similar to Lexington in terms of population, educational attainment, and income. Each has a significant Asian population and higher civic participation among that population than Lexington.

They started with a survey instrument developed in coordination with Framingham State students and Lexington town and school leaders. Surveys were followed-up by a selection of interviews that included former Superintendent Mary Czajkowski and Town Manager Carl Valente with officials from the benchmark communities.

This project culminated with a visit to Lexington from three leaders of the Walnut Valley United School District in California (which has an Asian student population exceeding 50 percent). The Committee’s final report came out in 2016, and the town and schools continue to mine the project for valuable insights into cultural inclusion.

Culture Formation

This type of deep work is the hallmark of 20/20 Vision and often prompts even greater exploration and discovery. Cultural inclusion is an ongoing and complex concern that the 20/20 Vision committee continues to address.

Quezada, who is modest about his personal contributions to 20/20 Vision, is a forward-thinker. He focuses on building shared community value and identity, anticipating challenges, and evolving to meet the needs of the residents. He is also a bit of a romantic. When he talks about Lexington and its culture, he reflects on trees and open spaces, on values and education while acknowledging changes over time.

“The challenge that I see here is in identifying mechanisms that create a culture for the town,” Quezada said. “The changing nature of the community itself has been something that is like a moving target.”

Currently, he is excited about a 20/20 Vision project to improve town-wide communications. The work will examine the ways that communications can align with and represent community values to support citizens.

In addition to diversity and communications efforts, the 20/20 Vision Committee will be examining the Future of e-Government—something that has become urgent in this era of COVID-19. Town Meeting will be going virtual, and undoubtedly much of the learning from this very compressed experiment will inform 20/20 Vision work on this topic over the next months.

As COVID-19 hit, and the Town of Lexington’s response took shape, I was reflecting on 20/20 Vision and its impact. Our new Communications Director, Sean Dugan, has been working overtime to keep citizens informed. Dugan’s hiring was driven by 20/20 Vision research and recommendations on communication. Materials regarding the coronavirus were translated into several languages reflecting sensitivity to multiple ethnic communities, heightened by the diversity work of 20/20 Vision. Over the years 20/20 Vision has provided research and guidance to the town on many of these essential communication functions because citizens have continually expressed through 20/20 surveys that they want better communication from the town.

It has been great to see many of these communications tools come together effectively in a crisis. It has been especially gratifying to see that Lexington remains a place with a real sense of community, true to its values and evolving with the times. Neighbors reach out in support, businesses stand ready to serve, educators step up with remote learning, and our diversity blends into solidarity, as one community of Lexingtonians.

Over the years, the 20/20 Vision Committee has been guided by an

**OUR DIVERSITY
BLENDS INTO
SOLIDARITY
AS ONE
COMMUNITY OF
LEXINGTONIANS.**

extraordinary group of volunteers. It has operated in complete transparency and with professionalism drawing on the deep expertise and training of many of Lexington’s residents. However, it has not succeeded because it is an academic exercise; it has succeeded because it is a living, breathing expression of community sentiment—aspirational, practical, contradictory, and messy.

20/20 Vision has created a framework for creating order out of chaos. It is an invaluable planning tool for the town. Through observation, data collection, and study combined with community participation, it can reveal trends, uncover potential problems and help guide us to solutions.

There will be work to do past 2020. Things will never be the same after COVID-19, but there will be opportunities as well. Thankfully, Lexington 20/20 Vision is poised to help the community evolve.

Twenty years on, we reflect on the many accomplishments of 20/20 Vision and thank the volunteers who have served on countless committees to strengthen our community.