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briefly

Here's the ideas from the Jan. 17 breakfast

## How can we improve Bluffton?

Place 60 Bluffton residents in a room, provide them with a free breakfast, divide them into seven tables, designate one person to take notes, then ask four questions, with six minutes to address each question.

Using this format, the Bluffton Area Chamber of Commerce held a brainstorming session on how to improve the community. The discussion included lots of ideas (see responses below).

And the discussion is not over. The session continues from noon to 1 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 5, in the third floor of the town hall. The discussion, called a "brown bag lunch roundtable" invites any community member to participate.

Fred Steiner of the chamber planned the Jan. 17 chamber breakfast after several similar discussions took place this fall and winter on much smaller levels.

"The chamber will continue to hold a monthly brown bag roundtable so that we can decide what priorities the community wants to focus on in several areas," said Steiner.

"Every discussion point is on the table," Steiner said. "The chamber realizes that Bluffton has several qualities that area communities our size envy. This point of this exercise is to build on the strengths our community already possesses. We want to advance to the next level."

Following are the questions and responses from each table at the Jan. 17 break-

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#### **Brown Bag Roundtable Wednesday, Feb. 5**

The chamber will host a bring-your-own lunch from noon to 1 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 5, in the third floor of the town hall. The theme of the lunch is "How can we improve Bluffton?" This is a continuation of the Jan. 17 chamber breakfast, which focused on this theme.

fast. Sometimes responses repeat simply because the ideas came up at several tables. Some of the ideas are phrases, or simply words.

### **Question 1: What can we do to attract more shoppers downtown and what can we do to make Bluffton a destination?**

#### **Responses:**

Create special multi-stores sales, "sidewalk sales." Keep major events spaced out instead of combining them into one event. Does Bluffton have a motto? Increase advertising the events in Bluffton.

Transportation from airport to downtown is needed. Place an outlet mall in Allen County. Have better signage and access to Bluffton on I-75.

Maybe the bike path will happen. Expand and connect it to surrounding communities like Pandora and Columbus Grove. Get a bike shop in town. Hold a May 31 Andy Chaffee triathlon. The chamber needs a retail development group to help plan for downtown growth. Can we expand "sideways" as well as up and down Main Street? Taste of Celina is run by its Lions Club. It's a ticket-based event and food-based event. Maybe we should try that in Bluffton. We need better communication with the community about what all is planned here. Get a billboard map of Bluffton visible in various places. Put a mural on the A to Z Meats building.

Create a virtual tour of Bluffton on the chamber website. Create a "holiday walk." Put signs on I-75 announcing the Blaze of Lights.

A bike shop, unique shops, Swiss heritage, bicycle tour or race, shops and storefronts open during special events. Loyalty program. Downtown business association.

To attract more shoppers we need signs at I-75 and State Route 103. We need "way finding" signs. We need parking signs on both sides of Main Street. Out-of-town employees don't know where things are in Bluffton. We need to create online reviews of Bluffton. There are several websites that can help us with these. Maybe launch a "Fourth" Friday where things happen downtown in the summer.

A kiosk showing what downtown businesses offer at the theatre would be nice. Let's put signs by fast food restaurants leading to downtown. Create a Welcome Wagon with cards of businesses and samples of business products. Create a business newspaper with coupons.

### **Question 2: What is Bluffton missing?**

#### **Responses:**

We need a good family restaurant. Exposure at I-75 with signage and landscaping. Make visitors feel welcome. Greet visitors. Improve the entrance into Bluffton off I-75. Update the north side of I-75. Clean it up.

We have an outdated master calendar. It needs revised. We need e-mail blasts with text alerts about events. We need an Office Depot, better communications between the community and businesses, expanded business hours.

Community gardens. A place for sit down dining. Open hangar night at the airport, perhaps with a car show. A historical museum. Self-guided tour depicting Swiss heritage possibly during fall festival month.

Self-guided tours depicting history of buildings (Lima does this at Halloween describing history of buildings.).

Downtown amphetheatre, evening shopping, promote upstairs living, entrance signs to the community, historical house/building walking tours.

We need a women's clothing store, a family restaurant, replace the Eagle's Nest restaurant, better signage about Bluffton on State Route 103 and 235. ONU signage is at that location.

Family restaurant and bakery, spa, electronics store, sit down pizza place, bike shop, photo copy location, challenge businesses to decorate items and auction them off as a promotion.

We need better parking, a downtown park to sit in, development along Riley Creek (walking paths, a park), mini-clothing store.

**Question 3: What's the greatest community need that the chamber can provide or assist in?**

**Responses:**

Improve downtown properties. Buy properties for improvements. A summer fireworks. Community block part to come and meet your neighbors. Communication and organize and coordinate all events including the car show and craft show. The chamber could create a bike tour map.

Two school issues needed addressed are that bullying at school has increased, and a stay strong and free drug abuse program is needed.

Transportation to Bluffton events, push the benefits of shopping local, raise awareness of local shops. A brochure showing places to eat in Bluffton. Better use of Icon and the community calendar in promoting events.

**Question 4: What additional benefits should the chamber provide for its members?**

**Responses:**

Keep dues down. Continue growing. Keep membership informed of opportunities coming up. Seek volunteers from membership for help. Texting service and a master calendar.

Workers' compensation – discount for being a member. Discount on medical insurance. Continue to invite outside organizations to chamber events and meetings. Continue promoting Bluffton. Show what the chamber offers to businesses, families and other organizations.

Review of 2013 projects; looking at 2014 projects;  
chamber wish list and other points to discuss

## **Chamber looks back and ahead**

The following background information was provided to each of the seven tables in the brainstorming session. This material could be viewed as a 2013 chamber annual report - showing project launched by the chamber. It reveals projects the chamber hopes to accomplish in 2014. It is also a summary of many conversations and comments gleaned in recent years in chamber meetings.

### **2013 chamber-supported projects** *(these will continue into 2014)*

- Bluffton Public Library, \$200 golf outing sponsor
- Shannon Cemetery Project, \$500 sponsor
- Bluffton Pathway-Bicycle Project, \$500 sponsor
- Advertising to promote Blaze of Lights, Arts and Crafts Show, Holiday Open House
  - approximately \$3,000
- Payout to some out of town participants in Blaze Parade \$1,200  
(Yes, it costs money to put on quality parade of 100 units)
- Coordinated \$2,100 in group advertising for Allen County visitor's guide  
(2011 and 2012, not 2013)
- Provide information for monthly "Explore Bluffton" full-page full-color ad in Lima News. Bluffton businesses pay for the page – the chamber provides the calendar information
- Miscellaneous gift certificates for prizes and retirement gifts
- Sponsor of one downtown flowerpot at \$75; helped to coordinate business contributions to keep the flowerpot project ongoing
- Sponsored "Driving Miss Daisy" performance to raise funds for downtown banners
- Purchase items as gifts for out-of-town chamber breakfast speakers
- Expanded arts and crafts show allowing chamber members to have free booths, added a health fair, added a kid's bike rodeo, and llama exhibit. Removed out-of-town food vendors to enable local food vendors and restaurants to benefit
- Provide \$350 in gift certificate prize money for holiday residential lighting contest.
- Bluffton University business showcase; 25 businesses participate each September
- Added special interest "workshops" following chamber breakfasts. Topics have included: human resources, Social Security, health insurance, social media, issues facing one-owner businesses, intellectual property, changes in tax law

### **Projects planned and under consideration in 2014**

- Working on a fireworks display in late June
- \$2,100 in downtown banner fund – will continue to develop this
- Launch "cash mobs." The first one is Jan. 29 at The Dough Hook. We hope to do this each month. This event enables all downtown businesses the opportunity to have special sales and benefit on the coattails of the cash mob host business.
- The new Explore Bluffton Visitors' Guide will be available in February or March.
- Noon brown bag roundtable discussions on "how to improve Bluffton." First one is Feb. 5. Depending upon its success, these may take place monthly.
- With intern assistance we will offer all chamber members a QR code to post of their business window and use in all marketing, plus continued social media one-on-ones.
- Chamber golf outing fundraiser

- Battle of the businesses – a fun, relationship building activity
- Chamber and Bluffton Center for Entrepreneurs becoming more closely affiliated. This could create a chamber with a different set of tools, goals and mission statement. Perhaps a three-pronged focus on: Entrepreneurial encouragement; Visitor promotion/event promotion; downtown business alliance
- Working more closely with Bluffton University Business Club. Perhaps develop a Young Professional organization under the chamber’s umbrella to encourage and promote university grads to stay in Bluffton. Develop a mentoring/internship program

## **Points for further discussion**

- Signs indicating location of public parking for downtown
- A “You are here” sign on Main Street (similar to signs in malls)
- Main Street alley beautification (Think: Columbus Northside)
- More parking spaces on the west side of Main Street
- Creation of a continually operating “welcome wagon” for new residents
- Signage on or near Interstate 75 pointing to Bluffton and its features
- Enter the “Best small villages in Ohio” competition – Ohio Magazine
- Expand our presences as a community to visit at Christmas (with more lights downtown, on Presbyterian Church lawn, and continued addition to residential light contest prize money)
- Hanging flower pots on Main Street light poles – adding to the pots already on the sidewalk
- Seasonal banners on Main Street – can we switch some of the flags out of the light poles to replace them with banners – is it time for a new downtown look?
- Beautification of Interstate exists. (Think: Piqua); “Bluffton” wordage on overpass bridges (Think: Findlay and Easton); focus on I-75 Bluffton water tower (Think: Perrysburg)
- Summer outdoor band concerts with a Bluffton “First Friday” event in June-July-August.

The next step:

## **Brown-bag lunch roundtable Feb. 5**

The chamber plans to continue its discussion of “How can we improve Bluffton?” which was the focus of the Jan. 17 chamber breakfast. The discussion continues from noon to 1 p.m., Wednesday, Feb. 5, in the third floor of the town hall. The discussion is open to any chamber member and any Bluffton resident. P.S: bring your own lunch.

### ***Important note:***

Please read the story about the “cash mob” on the next page. There are several easy steps all Bluffton businesses can make to launch this project and make it a success.

A new chamber venture

## Monthly “cash mob day” in Bluffton

Each month of 2014 the chamber will hold a “Cash Mob Day.” The first one is from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m., Wednesday, Jan. 29, with The Dough Hook, 117 N. Main St., as the host business. The downtown meat market and deli will extend its normal hours until 5:30 p.m. to allow additional shoppers to visit the business.

During the cash mob hours The Dough Hook will offer 10 percent off all cheese in the shop. In addition, the Bluffton Area Chamber of Commerce will invite all shoppers to enter to win a chamber-sponsored \$25 shopping spree in The Dough Hook.

In addition to The Dough Hook offering special discounts and the shopping spree, several other Bluffton businesses will offer discounts during the 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. cash mob hours.

A list of all participating businesses will be available in a chamber of commerce display table in The Dough Hook.

If your business wants to be a cash mob host store please contact Aphaphanh Nussbaum at Ten Thousand Villages or Julie Stratton at The Black Lab.

## What you need to do:

The cash mob will only work if every chamber member reading this does the following two easy steps:

1 - E-mail [blufftonchamber@gmail.com](mailto:blufftonchamber@gmail.com) and provide us with your own store’s special offers during the 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. Jan. 29 cash mob hours. Do this by Tuesday at 5 p.m. The chamber will create a flyer listing all businesses participating. Flyers will be handed out at The Dough Hook.

2 - Place the Bluffton cash mob notice on your facebook and Twitter accounts. Remind your “friends” that Bluffton has a special day and special hours on Jan. 29.

### **Bluffton Area Chamber of Commerce Board:**

Larry Hoffman, president; Tammy Whitlow secretary, Aphaphanh Nussbaum, Adam Stedke, Jamie Mehaffie, Derek Dukes, Mark Alliman, Bob Inniger, Doug Luginbill, Sally Siferd, Branden Fortman, Phil Zimmerly. Fred Steiner, CEO.

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