



WESTPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OPENING DOORWAYS *into* WESTPORT'S PAST

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STRATEGIC PLAN 2019-2021

The last eight years have been a time of great transformation for the Westport Historical Society. Following the purchase of the Handy House, the WHS undertook a major fund-raising campaign, and has completed structural repairs at the Handy House, a new parking area, and a recently constructed “barn”. Not only did these projects reinvigorate the WHS, they also initiated significant organizational change.

With the successful completion of major projects at the Handy House, and having made progress towards financial sustainability through a combination of membership dues, annual appeal, grants and special events, the Board recognized a need to address some long-standing issues, to build on its strengths and to meet some new challenges. With the understanding that organizational priorities and needs can change quickly and in surprising ways, the Board elected to formulate an action plan for the next three years.

The strategic planning process took place over several months from December 2017 to July 2018. Members of the strategic planning committee included Breck Arnzen, Buzzy Baron, Yvonne Barr, Carol Bonnar, Tony Connors, Jenny O’Neill, and Emily Sutton. At the beginning of this process, the Board reconfirmed that its current mission statement accurately reflects the vision of the organization.

“The mission of the Westport Historical Society is to engage the public in the exploration of the town’s rich history and culture, to inspire a spirit of discovery through educational programs and encourage active participation in the preservation and interpretation of our past. The Society collects and shares this history. Its goal is to foster the imaginative process of connecting to the past, making it relevant to our present and vital to the future of our community.”

THE STRATEGIC PLAN FOCUSES ON FOUR GOALS:

- Define the best use of the Bell School
- Improve collections storage and preservation
- Ensure ongoing relevance to our community
- Build organizational capacity

The strategic plan was adopted by the Board on July 16, 2018.

GOAL 1: DEFINE THE BEST USE OF THE BELL SCHOOL

During the last eight years, the WHS has focused all resources on the Handy House. As a result, the Bell School has been neglected. As our year-round headquarters, the Bell School is a conspicuous symbol of the WHS, yet, the building requires significant structural improvements. It does not offer handicapped accessibility and receives few visitors. However, its location at the Head of Westport, an increasingly vibrant and busy area, is advantageous and its interior spaces offer great potential for meeting the current needs of the Historical Society.

MILESTONES:

- Create a plan for the use of the Bell School for the next three years, weighing the needs for office/administrative space, storage space for the collection and exhibition space.
- Complete structural repairs to the foundation, rear lean-to shed and bell tower.
- Improve interpretation of the building and of the surrounding community of the Head of Westport.

GOAL 2: IMPROVE COLLECTIONS STORAGE AND PRESERVATION

The challenges of storing collections in a historic structure with limited space have made it difficult for the WHS to meet basic museum standards for the preservation of its collection. For many years, the WHS has considered the options of off-site storage, constructing a building dedicated to collection storage or improving the use of space within the Bell School for collections storage. Fortunately, much of the collection is catalogued and accessible through an online database, and now priority must be given to the physical conditions in which the collection is stored.

MILESTONES:

- Create and implement a storage plan for the collection, administrative records and supplies.
- Address the preservation and access needs of endangered and underutilized collections such as the oral history collection.

GOAL 3: ENSURE ONGOING RELEVANCE TO OUR COMMUNITY

The WHS is known for its active, year-round schedule of public programs, lectures, exhibitions, tours, and annual events such as the Artisan Fair. These programs are well attended by members of the Westport community. However, to ensure our ongoing relevance, the WHS must strive to broaden its audience, expand visibility and leverage the Handy House to its full extent.

MILESTONES:

- A new initiative, exploring the Wampanoag heritage of Westport, is already underway with programming to begin in 2019.
- Target specific groups in Westport to expand our understanding of each community.
- Develop a marketing strategy for the Handy House.
- Diversify interpretive techniques at the Handy House to attract visitors, especially families.
- Expand the use of the Handy House through additional events or by engaging other groups/organizations in town.

GOAL 4: BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

The WHS has an active working Board, a full-time Executive Director, part-time Education Manager and a part-time bookkeeper. However, it continues to rely heavily on a small group of volunteers for many tasks. Committees have become more active in recent years, but there is a need to involve a larger, more diverse group of individuals at all levels of the organization.

MILESTONES:

- Create an organizational succession plan
- Strengthen committees
- Recruit new volunteers
- Create an Advisory Council
- Hire an administrative assistant
- Review bylaws