



# Community Engagement Strategy

## Introduction

The Town of Mansfield is currently engaged in the Mansfield Tomorrow initiative, aimed at improving community planning by fostering collaboration among various projects and organizations. One of its key objectives is to promote equity and enhance public engagement by consolidating activities under Mansfield Tomorrow, ensuring broader community involvement beyond typical participants. This approach utilizes a mix of in-person and digital methods to reduce engagement fatigue and confusion. Within this framework, the Northwest Mansfield Vision and Strategy Plan addresses the evolving landscape of Northwest Mansfield, prompted by recent changes such as development activity, a school closure and shifts in housing dynamics. This plan aims to guide growth, assist with updating the Town's zoning regulations, enhance pedestrian and cyclist safety, address transportation needs, and preserve environmental resources in the area.

## Equitable Community Engagement

Equitable community engagement is a key aspect of the Northwest Mansfield Vision and Strategy Plan development process. Efforts were made to engage stakeholders at all stages of the planning process and provide opportunities to reach residents throughout Mansfield. These include the development of the Plan project website, the launch of an online survey, attendance at pop-up community events, a public workshop, and various interviews. This carefully thought-out engagement process was designed to be inclusive; including everyone from children to seniors, and equitable so that residents from all parts of Town could participate at various times and at various occasions to engage a diverse range of residents. Key themes and findings from these efforts are described in further detail on the following pages. To reach as many of Mansfield's residents as possible, the project team used a variety of methods to share information about the planning process. Promotional flyers were created and distributed throughout the Town to places such as the Mansfield Community Center, Town Hall, and Library. Flyers and other project information such as social media posts were also promoted on the Town's website.

## Ways People Were Engaged

- **Project Website** – a project website was developed to provide information and updates about the Plan.
- **Community Open House** – July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023 – Public Open House providing an overview of the three main planning initiatives included in Mansfield Tomorrow – 100 attendees.
- **Celebrate Mansfield Day** – September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023 – Pop-up booth at well attended pre-planned community event – engaged with approximately 200 stakeholders.
- **Online Survey** - October – December 2023 – An online survey was developed that was available during a two-month time period. Over 350 people took part in the survey.
- **Public Workshop** – November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023 – A Community Workshop was held that included a presentation and break out discussion sessions – 50 attendees.
- **Interviews (11)** – Fall 2024 – Interviews were conducted with stakeholders - 28 stakeholders were engaged.

- **Focus Groups (5)** – Fall 2024 – Focus Group meetings were conducted and organized based on different topics pertaining to the Plan – 29 stakeholders were engaged.

## Key Themes

### The following key themes emerged during the planning process and were common across all community engagement efforts:

**Transportation and Infrastructure Concerns:** Participants highlighted traffic congestion at key intersections, speeding in residential areas, and insufficient sidewalk connectivity as pressing issues in Northwest Mansfield. Concerns extended to the need for improved pedestrian and bicycle amenities, particularly along Route 195 connecting to UConn. Participants emphasized the importance of addressing these transportation challenges to enhance safety and accessibility within the community.

**Housing Affordability and Neighborhood Stability:** Discussions revolved around the lack of affordable housing options for younger families and the perceived threats to neighborhood stability posed by absentee landlords and the encroachment of student housing into traditionally single-family residential zones. Attendees expressed concern about the potential impacts on property values and community cohesion, emphasizing the significance of maintaining a diverse and stable housing market.

**Community Livability and Maintenance:** Participants highlighted the need for better property maintenance practices and strategies to address noise and litter issues, aiming to preserve the aesthetic appeal and quality of life in Northwest Mansfield. There was a shared sentiment among many residents about the importance of safeguarding the town's rural character while ensuring that public spaces and amenities are well-maintained and accessible to all.

**Support for Open Spaces and Resource Protection:** Residents expressed appreciation for the rural atmosphere, trail network, and open space resources in Northwest Mansfield. They voiced support for continued investments in community amenities, such as parks and recreational facilities, acknowledging their role in enhancing the overall quality of life for residents and attracting visitors to the area. Environmental resource protection is a key priority for residents, especially Northwest Mansfield's watersheds, wetlands, and forests.

**Opposition to Further Development:** Many attendees voiced opposition to additional high-density residential developments, citing concerns about increased traffic congestion, strain on municipal services, and potential changes to the town's identity. Residents expressed a desire to preserve the existing landscape and limit further urbanization, underscoring the importance of balanced and sustainable development practices.

**Desire for Diverse Housing Options and Redevelopment:** There was a clear desire among participants for diverse housing options that cater to the needs of seniors, young families, and faculty members from UConn. Discussions also centered around the potential for redevelopment projects focused on low-impact development and revitalization of existing properties, with an emphasis on maintaining the town's distinct identity heritage as an agrarian community.

**Community-Centric Reuse of Goodwin Elementary School:** Ideas for repurposing the former Goodwin Elementary School were diverse and community-centric, reflecting a desire to preserve the building for public use while meeting the evolving needs of residents. Suggestions included transforming it into a senior center, affordable housing units, an arts facility, or a community park. Any redevelopment should incorporate sustainable development practices.

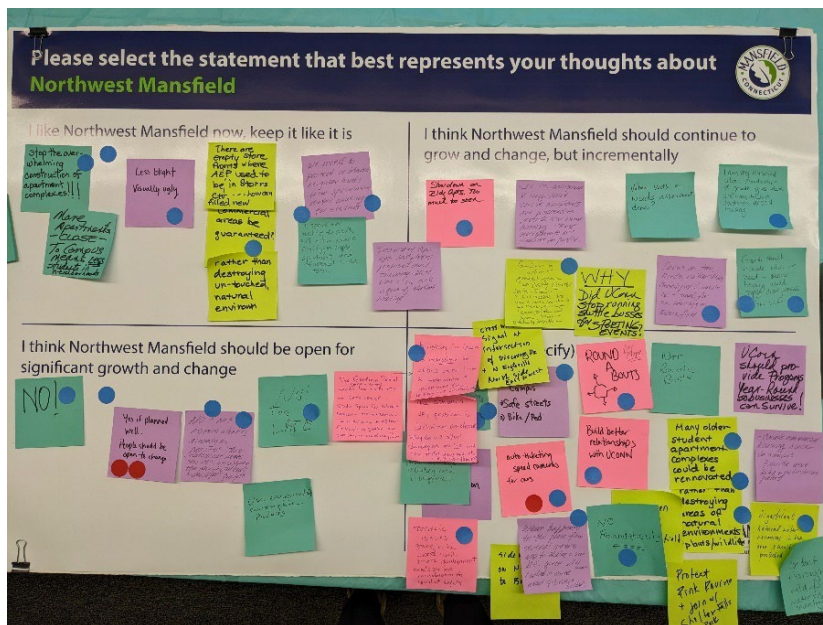
# Results

## Project Website

A project website, <https://mansfieldtomorrow.org/nw-neighborhood-plan/> was created to provide information about the Plan, advertise events, and to generate interest in the Plan. The project website includes links to an online survey, and meeting documents and materials.

## Community Open House

A community open house was held in July 2023 that was focused on providing information about three of Mansfield's planning projects. The workshop included a brief presentation about Mansfield Tomorrow as well as high level overviews of each of the plans. After the presentation, attendees were encouraged to visit interactive stations for each of the plans. Approximately **100 members of the public** attended the workshop and participated in the exercises conducted at the stations.



Examples of comments received during the Community Open House

**General Overview of Discussion:** Most attendees were older adult residents of Mansfield who had resided in the community for over twenty years. Most were concerned about current development trends and skeptical of the motive behind the Northwest Mansfield Plan. Residents were concerned that the Plan would promote increased development in the area specifically for UConn student housing. It was explained that the role of the Plan is to create a vision and guide for the Town to plan for and manage future growth with input from town residents. Several younger adults/families attended and expressed that they moved to Mansfield because of its proximity to UConn. While they were equally unhappy with much of the development that has occurred over the past few years, they were enthusiastic about planning and change in order to improve these issues in the town. They expressed a desire for more communication and cooperation with the University.

### *Key Takeaways*

- Road safety: Speeding is an issue, need for bike/ped friendly streets and traffic calming.
- Public transportation: Should service more areas and more people, senior transportation is needed.
- Businesses: High dependence on student population, limited patrons when school is out of session, hard to sustain business given the seasonal nature of the population.
- Need for more open space: Access to open space in Four Corners area is desired.
- Student rentals cause concerns: Issues with on-street parking, speeding, parties, litter. Enforce restrictions on student rentals.
- Development concerns: water quality and quantity concerns with increased development, Cedar Swamp watershed, Four Corners area, conduct needs assessment for UConn housing.
- Increase coordination with UConn: UConn should be heavily involved in Northwest Mansfield Plan.
- Questions about the fate of Goodwin School: ideas to convert to Senior Center or arts/maker space.
- Four Corners area: provide beautification.

## **Celebrate Mansfield Day**

The project team attended Celebrate Mansfield Day on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023, engaging approximately **200 residents**. The purpose of this event was to promote the Plan process, advertise the project website and online survey, and invite residents to attend the public workshop. During the event, participants were asked to identify on a map Northwest Mansfield's assets, opportunities, and challenges. Residents were also asked to identify what they like about the area, what they do not like, and what they would like to see more of in Northwest Mansfield. Responses were recorded on post-it notes and displayed so that residents could see their neighbors' responses. Stationary map boards were also placed at the Town Hall as a method to further promote the Plan and project website as well as gather feedback from a diverse range of stakeholders. The map boards were in place for three months and were equipped with post-it notes and sharpie markers for recording so that participants could provide comments at any time, at their leisure. Key themes from the pop-up events are presented below.



## Key Takeaways

### What do you like about Northwest Mansfield?

- Sense of community, small town feeling
- Rural atmosphere
- Proximity to UConn and the cultural assets associated with the University
- Open space and environmental resources

### What do you dislike about Northwest Mansfield?

- Student rentals encroaching into residential neighborhoods
- High density developments geared toward student housing
- Young families cannot find affordable homes, they often move to neighboring communities
- Seasonal nature of population makes it challenging for business to survive during the summer
- There are not enough things to do in the area, nothing to draw you to the area and nothing to do once you are there
- Traffic can be problematic at peak times of the day such as rush hour
- Speeding has been observed, especially along some of the residential streets
- Student housing on Hunting Lodge Road is run down-blighted

### What would you like to see more of in Northwest Mansfield?

- Senior housing
- Housing that is affordable for younger families
- A grocery store or ice cream shop
- Need more businesses that generate activity
- Need more sidewalks, especially along 195 towards the UConn campus
- Goodwin School should be repurposed as a Town park, community center, or housing
- Better transportation options for those that cannot drive

### Common General Comments

- Too much large-scale development has been approved in recent years, fearful of what that development will bring
- Concerns for negative impacts to the environment and traffic
- Some were excited about the additional housing that is being built



*Participants providing comments during Celebrate Mansfield Day*



*Mansfield Tomorrow table at Celebrate Mansfield Day*

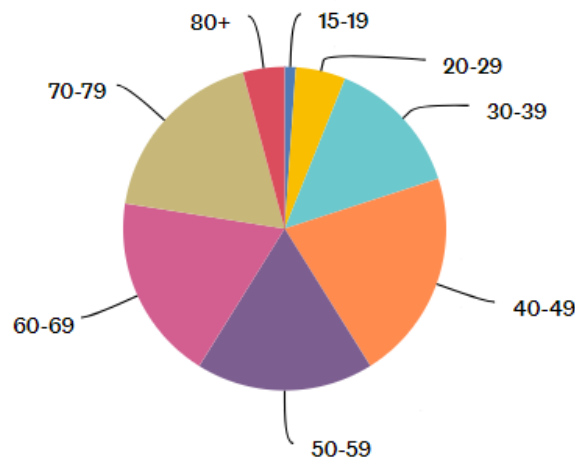
## Online Survey

An online survey was launched to gather input from Mansfield’s residents and business owners regarding topics and issues discussed in the Plan. Bookmarks, created in English and Spanish, with the website link, advertising the online survey were distributed at Celebrate Mansfield Day on September 30<sup>th</sup> and were posted on the Town’s website and social media platforms. The survey generated over **350 responses** from individuals in the community.

### Key Takeaways

- Concerns for overdevelopment in Northwest Mansfield.
- Concerns for blight and the conversion of single-family residential neighborhoods into student housing.
- A strong desire to preserve and protect Northwest Mansfield’s open space resources.
- Need for more bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure in Northwest Mansfield.
- More commercial businesses could be accommodated in this area.
- Need for a diversity of housing such as senior housing and housing for families.

*The online survey generated responses from a diverse age range of the Mansfield Population.*



## Public Workshop

A public workshop was conducted to introduce the Mansfield community to the Plan process and to gather the public’s thoughts regarding a vision and strategy for Northwest Mansfield. The workshop included a brief presentation of key trends and findings, interactive polling, and break-out sessions led by facilitators with a report back to the group at the conclusion of the meeting. A general summary of feedback for each of the questions is provided on the following pages. Over **50 people** attended the workshop.



*Participants at the Public Workshop*

### *Key Takeaways*

#### **Question 1: What are the issues in Northwest Mansfield? What are your concerns?**

##### **Summary**

Attendees highlighted several pressing issues in Northwest Mansfield. Foremost among these concerns was the traffic congestion at key intersections and the recurring problem of speeding within residential areas. The insufficient sidewalk connectivity, notably along Route 195 connecting to UConn, emerged as a significant issue. There were apprehensions about the stability of neighborhoods due to absentee landlords and the encroachment of student housing into traditionally single-family residential zones. Additionally, there were widespread calls for better property maintenance and addressing issues of noise and litter. The discussion also focused on the potential implications of future high-density developments and the increase in student housing. The lack of affordable housing options for younger families aspiring to settle in the area surfaced as a prominent challenge discussed by participants. These concerns collectively highlight the issues affecting Northwest Mansfield, encompassing transportation, housing, neighborhood integrity, and community livability.

#### **Question 2: What do you like about Northwest Mansfield? What's working?**

##### **Summary**

Attendees like the rural atmosphere of Northwest Mansfield and its trail network and open space resources. In general, residents were supportive and appreciative of the many improvements and investments that have been made in the Town in recent years. Many attendees said that proximity to UConn provides opportunities to attend sporting events and shows that would not be available in other communities.

### **Question 3: What ideas do you have to improve Northwest Mansfield?**

#### **Summary**

Participants discussed the need for traffic calming measures and connectivity improvements in Northwest Mansfield. Lighting and pedestrian and bicycle improvements are needed. Sidewalks and pedestrian amenities are desired. The need for additional public transportation options was discussed. Many attendees noted the need for additional housing for seniors, young families, and UConn faculty. Low impact development strategies and design guidelines for future development were also discussed. Participants noted the need to evaluate the zoning in Northwest Mansfield, particularly the Design Multiple Residence (DMR) Zone. Additional businesses such as restaurants or service-based stores are also desired. Participants noted that aesthetic improvements would be beneficial to Northwest Mansfield, and that events like neighborhood cleanups could help facilitate some of these improvements.

### **Question 4: If more development should occur in Northwest Mansfield, where should the development be located? What type and scale of development should be allowed?**

#### **Summary**

Many participants at the workshop were generally against additional development in Northwest Mansfield. They expressed concerns about the recent number of high-density residential developments that have been approved in the Town. To date, only one of the developments is under construction and many residents are apprehensive of the potential impacts they associate with additional housing such as increased traffic and a strain on the Town's municipal services. Condos, small lot residential homes, and age-restricted housing were development types that attendees were in favor of. Small scale retail in the Four Corners area, and redevelopment of existing commercial spaces was also favored by those who felt additional development should occur. Medical uses and assisted living facilities were discussed. It was also noted that if redevelopment occurs, it should be in walkable and bikeable areas and that connected sidewalks and bus and transit amenities would be needed. Participants emphasized the need to preserve open space areas and maintain riparian and wetland buffers in any further development. Development along the State highways 195 and 44 is preferred over development along Mansfield's local roadways.

### **Question 5: What areas of Northwest Mansfield should be preserved?**

#### **Summary**

Participants emphasized the need to preserve Northwest Mansfield's rural character and existing residential neighborhoods. Many participants expressed the desire for the area to maintain its small-town charm and were fearful that additional development would change the look and feel of the community. Attendees also noted the need to preserve the Town's open space areas, woodlands, and wetland resources. Many attendees favored redevelopment of existing developed properties over development on green or undeveloped property.

### **Question 6: What would you like to see happen with the former Goodwin Elementary School?**

#### **Summary**

A variety of different options were discussed when participants were asked about what they would like to see happen with the former Goodwin Elementary School. Reuse as a Senior Center or other community facility was frequently cited, as was its use as affordable housing for seniors. Reuse as an arts facility or makers space was also a popular response. Attendees also expressed interest in the property's reuse as a community park or recreation facility. Maintaining it as a public space for the Towns/communities use is important to residents.



## Interviews with Stakeholders

The project team conducted eleven interviews with stakeholders to discuss issues and ideas for Northwest Mansfield. In total, **about 30 stakeholders** participated in interviews. The following are sample questions from the interviews. The questions were tailored to the group the stakeholders represented, but followed the same general outline:

1. What do you like about Northwest Mansfield?
2. What are the issues you experience in Northwest Mansfield?
3. What do you think could improve Northwest Mansfield?
4. What should Northwest Mansfield be like in the future?
5. Is there anything you would like to see the Town do differently regarding Northwest Mansfield?
6. Is there anything you would like to see UConn do differently regarding Northwest Mansfield?
7. Are there areas of Northwest Mansfield where you feel additional growth should occur? If so, where are these areas and what type of development do you envision?
8. Are there areas of Northwest Mansfield that you feel should be preserved or remain undeveloped?
9. Do you have any ideas on the future use of the Goodwin Elementary School?

## Focus Group Meetings

The project team conducted five stakeholder interviews with various groups of representatives. Focus groups included neighbors, landlords and property managers, committees and interest groups, and local businesses. It is anticipated that an additional focus group with UConn representatives will be conducted in early 2024. In total, **about 30 stakeholders** attended the focus group meetings. The following are sample questions from the focus groups:

### Neighbors:

- What has your experience been like living in Northwest Mansfield?
- Are there any challenges presented by the area's proximity to UConn?
- Do you feel that the area has enough amenities?
- Is it easy to get around Northwest Mansfield?
- Do you plan on remaining in Northwest Mansfield in the future? 5, 20 + years? If you are thinking of relocating, how come?

### Landlords and Property Managers:

- As a landlord/property manager, what are the biggest challenges you face?
- Have you had any interaction with the Town, and if so, how has that experience been, how could it be improved?
- Do you have any interest/plans to expand or improve your properties? If so, how?
- Do you think that NW Mansfield could accommodate more development of the type that you own/manage?
- Are there any infrastructure or transportation needs in NW Mansfield?

### Committees and Interest Groups:

- What are the biggest needs/issues specific to NW Mansfield that your committee/commission deals with?
- Are these issues limited to Northwest Mansfield, or are they across the whole Town?

## UConn and Businesses

- Do you have any projects planned in Northwest Mansfield?
- For businesses: What could the Town do to support your business?
- Are there any amenities or infrastructure improvements that you feel are needed in Northwest Mansfield?
- Is utility infrastructure adequate to support growth in Northwest Mansfield?

## UConn Students

- How often do you travel to Northwest Mansfield, and how do you typically get between there and campus?
- What would you like to see more of in proximity to campus, what does the area need?
- Have you had any difficulties securing housing and do you live on or off campus?
- Do you use public transportation, and if so, how has that experience been?
- What types of amenities would you be looking for if you moved off campus and into one of the new proposed developments?

## *Key Takeaways*

Discussions held during the interviews and focus groups highlighted concerns about the high cost of living, traffic issues, limited transit in certain areas, and a balance between student housing and existing residential neighborhoods. Affordable housing and transparency regarding student housing development are major priorities. Residents also seek options for aging in the community, expressed worries about overdevelopment and wetland preservation, and value the Town's diversity and its ties to UConn. UConn faces challenges with declining enrollment and the community feels that there is a disconnect between the University's priorities for its campus and operations and the needs of residents of Northwest Mansfield. Proposed ideas for Northwest Mansfield include prioritizing affordable senior housing, creating recreational spaces, improving public transportation, attracting grocery stores, ensuring safety for walking, preserving natural spaces, and incorporating sustainability measures.



# Focus Group and Interview Attendees

## Focus Groups

### Landlords and Property Owners – October 16<sup>th</sup> at 2:30 PM

- Chase Powell
- Tony Giorgio
- Chok Lei
- Chris Nimer
- Doryanne Plante

### Concerned Neighbors – October 26<sup>th</sup> at 4:30 PM

- Brittany Barrett
- Dr. Chadwick Rittenhouse
- Kim Raiola
- Beverly Sims and husband?
- Matthew Varley
- Jilian Welne

### Committees and Interest Groups – October 26<sup>th</sup> at 6:00 PM

- Michael Accorsi, Affordable Housing Commission
- Kristen Dilaj, Economic Development Commission
- Ken Feathers, PNRC
- Lon Hultgren, Transportation Advisory Committee
- Michael Hveem, Joshua's Trust
- Ethel Mantzaris, Youth Advisory Committee
- John Riesen, Commission on Aging
- Dale Rose, Town/University Relations
- John Silander, Conservation Commission
- Lynn Stoddard, Sustainability Committee

### Business Owners – October 27<sup>th</sup> at 11:00 AM

- Ken Dardick, Mansfield Family Practice
- Nancy McKenny, Owner of Hops 44
- Chase Powell, The Standard

### UConn Students – October 27<sup>th</sup> at 11:00 AM

- Sean Dunn
- Gavin Kuebler
- Nick Lanza
- Haritha Subramanian
- Mariam Vargas



## Interviews

### Public Transportation – October 9<sup>th</sup> at 11:00 AM

- Phil Johnson
- Linda Hapeman

### UConn Representatives – October 10<sup>th</sup> at 3:00 PM

- Robert Corbett
- Cara Workman

### Housing and Zoning – October 11<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 AM

- Mike Ninteau
- Ben Fun

### Local Realtors – October 11<sup>th</sup> at 11:30 AM

- Jeremiah Cold-Kelly
- Steve Ferrigno

### Department of Public Works – October 11<sup>th</sup> at 1:30 PM

- John Carrington
- Derek Dilaj
- Virginia Walton

### Mansfield Housing Authority – October 16<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 AM

- Rebecca Fields
- Kathy Ward

### UConn and Town Public Safety Representatives – October 16<sup>th</sup> at 1:30 PM

- John Armstrong
- Chief Labonte
- Sergeant Merrill
- Fred Mitchell

### Town Council Interview – October 17<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 AM

- Chris Kueffner
- Toni Moran
- Ben Shaiken

### Superintendent and Director of Human Services – October 18<sup>th</sup> at 2:30 PM

- Peter Dart
- Allison Maynard





Concerned Neighbors – October 26<sup>th</sup> at 3:30 PM

- Alison Hilding
- Jeannette Picard
- Nancy Silander

UConn Representatives, Group 2 – January 10<sup>th</sup> at 2:30 PM

- Nathan Fuerst
- Stanley Nolan
- Sean Vasington