

## **Cape Elizabeth Business Forum Summary Report**

Date: *December 18, 2024*

### **Introduction**

The Cape Elizabeth Business Forum, driven by the Town Council, aimed to address the challenges and opportunities faced by the local business community and explore actionable solutions to foster a more business-friendly environment. Pre-surveys and interviews identified key themes for discussion: navigating ordinances, staffing support, community participation, and branding.

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### **Key Discussion Themes and Outcomes**

#### **1. Navigating Town Ordinances and Procedures**

- Business owners highlighted challenges with the complexity of ordinances, inconsistent guidance, and the time spent obtaining permits.
- Many participants emphasized the need for clearer processes and better support during the process from town staff.
- Suggestions included introducing a dedicated "permit sherpa" role to assist businesses in navigating regulations and advocating for streamlined planning and review processes.

#### **2. Need for Economic Development Expertise**

- Participants widely supported hiring part-time or dedicated economic development staff to:
  - Serve as a point of contact for business inquiries.
  - Provide support for developing regulatory changes.
  - Advocate for businesses within the town's administrative structure.
  - Facilitate the development of a business-friendly website with step-by-step guides for startups.
  - Provide support for accessing grants, financing, and other resources.
- It was noted that the existing structure is perceived as restrictive, with a need for a shift toward proactive support. Participants noted a desire for a staff support role, which prioritizes proactively supporting businesses and business development.

#### **3. Community Engagement in Ordinance Development**

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- Business owners expressed frustration over the limited avenues for proposing ordinance changes.
- A suggestion was made to involve business owners more directly in policy development and planning board feedback, potentially through regular councilor tours of local businesses. potentially, through regular communication opportunities with Town Council.

#### 4. **Defining and Promoting the Cape Elizabeth Brand**

- Discussions highlighted the need for a cohesive branding strategy to showcase the town's assets and attract both businesses and visitors. Most agreed that Cape Elizabeth is known as a "Drive Through" town or "too expensive."
- Suggestions included leveraging existing natural resources, such as the "town green," and promoting diverse, community-centric developments like restaurants and mixed-use spaces.
- Some residents expressed skepticism about the value of a town-wide branding initiative, arguing that branding efforts should be left to individual businesses. They emphasized the importance of focusing on infrastructure and regulatory improvements to enable businesses to define their own identities and succeed independently.

#### 5. **Additional Insights from Previous Business Surveys/Interviews**

- **Barriers to Development:** Business owners identified restrictive zoning and ordinances, high costs, and a lack of clarity in processes as significant obstacles.
- **Opportunities for Growth:** Key areas of opportunity include enhancing the town center with mixed-use development, supporting housing initiatives, and fostering a welcoming culture for new businesses.
- **Seasonal and Population Challenges:** Several businesses noted difficulties due to Cape Elizabeth's limited population and seasonal fluctuations, emphasizing the need for innovative strategies to increase year-round activity.

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### **Possible Actionable Steps**

Based on the forum's discussions, the following action points could have public support:

1. **Economic Development:** Evaluate the importance of allocating resources dedicated to supporting business growth and navigating town processes.
2. **Process Improvement - Ordinances:** Conduct an ordinance review for possible process improvements.

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3. **Process Improvement – Staff Workflow:** Streamline current planning and permitting process.
4. **Establish an Economic Development Committee:** A standing committee that would be staffed by a third-party economic development professional.
5. **Take Business Inventory:** Identify the available commercial space/properties in Cape Elizabeth and corresponding allowable uses.
6. **Branding Campaign:** Identify a marketing strategy that reflects Cape Elizabeth’s unique character and business potential.
7. **Infrastructure Improvements:** Address the need for sidewalks and public amenities through targeted investment.

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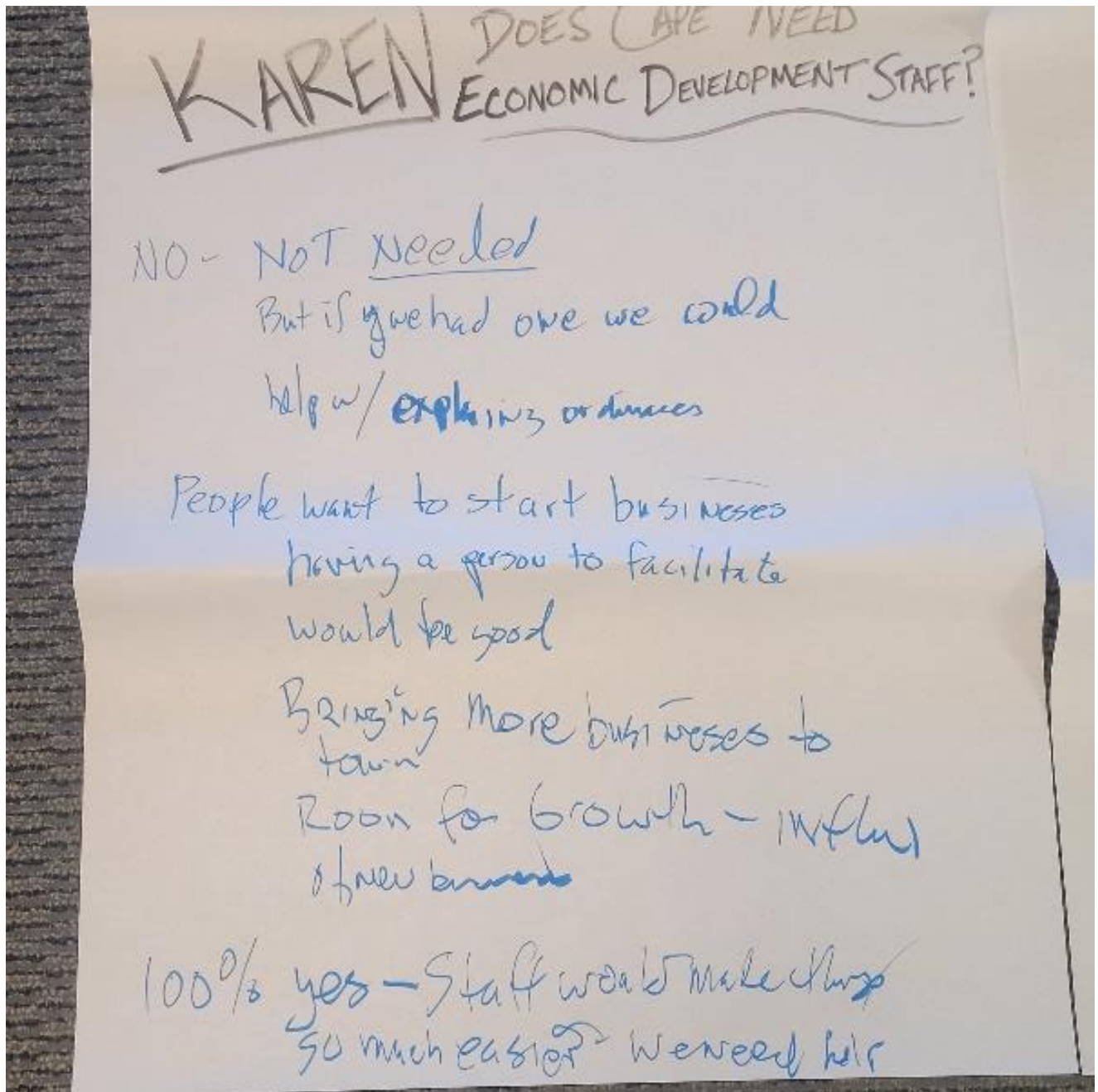
**Solution Summit - Joint Town Council/Business Community Workshop on April 7<sup>th</sup> @ 6:00PM**

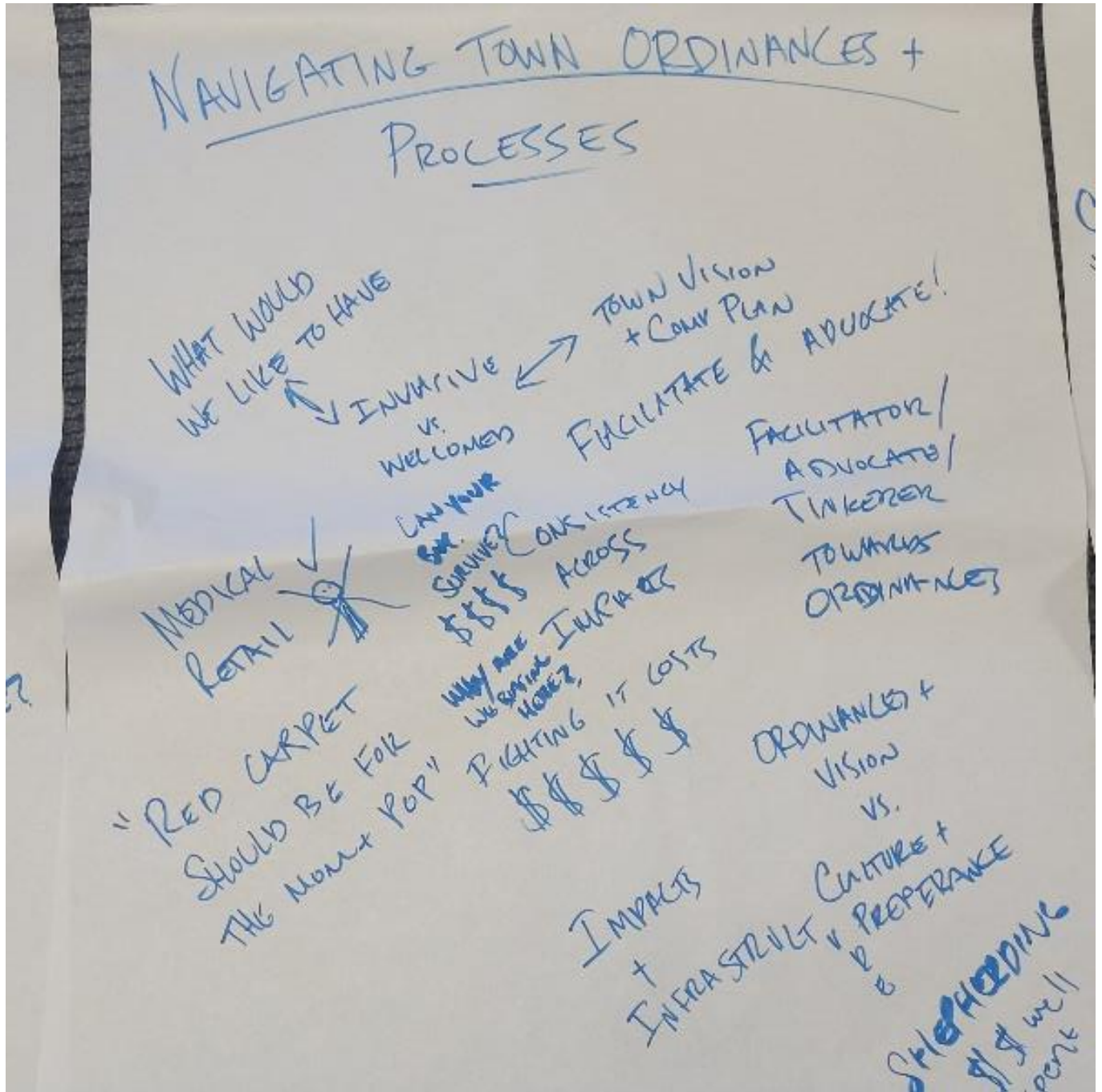
The April 2025 "solutions summit" will be in the form of a town council workshop. There will be a presentation from GPCOG staff and expanded opportunity for public comment/feedback from the business community. The workshop will focus on the entire business community outreach process and the results of the “Actionable Next Steps” survey.

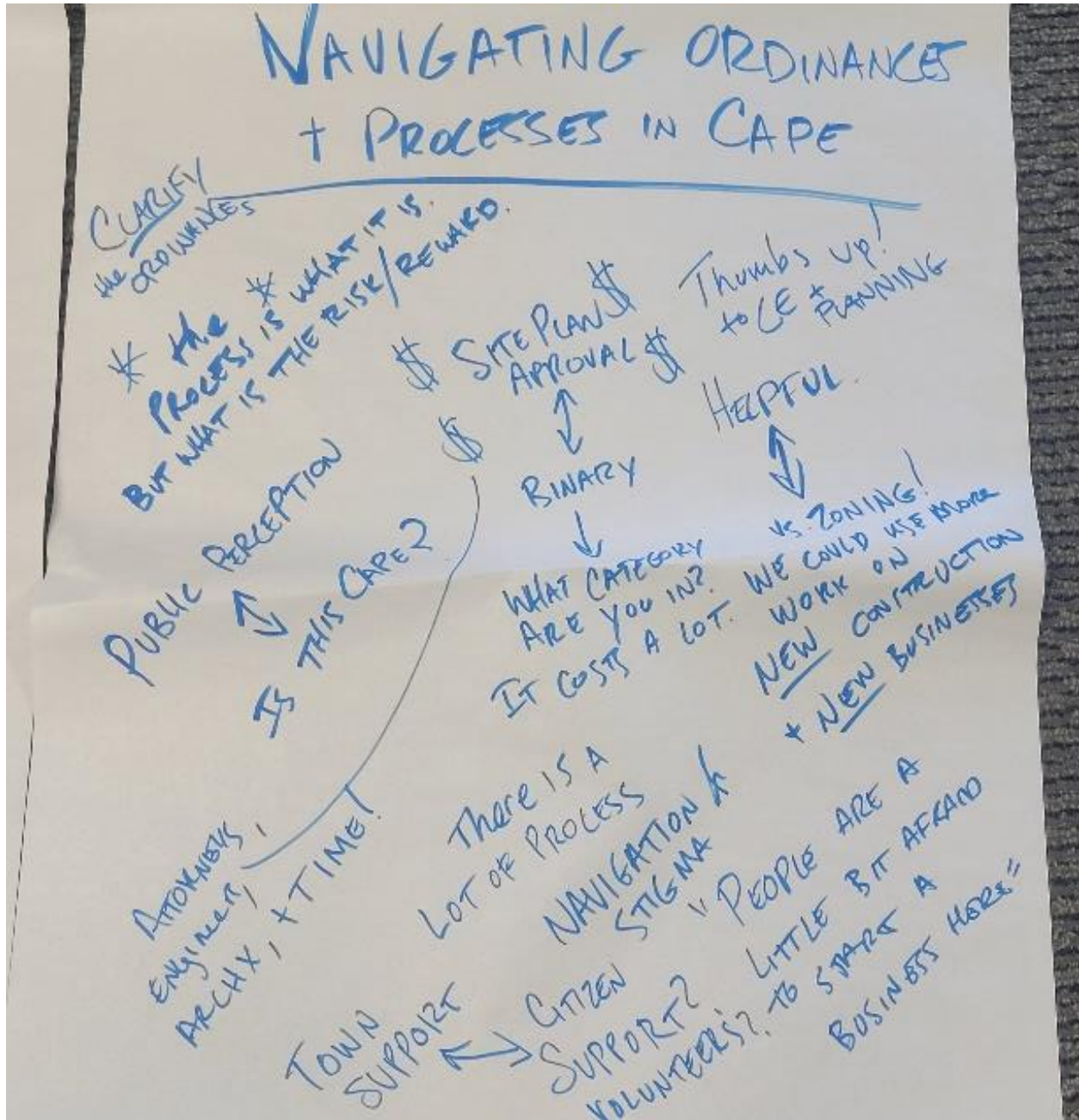
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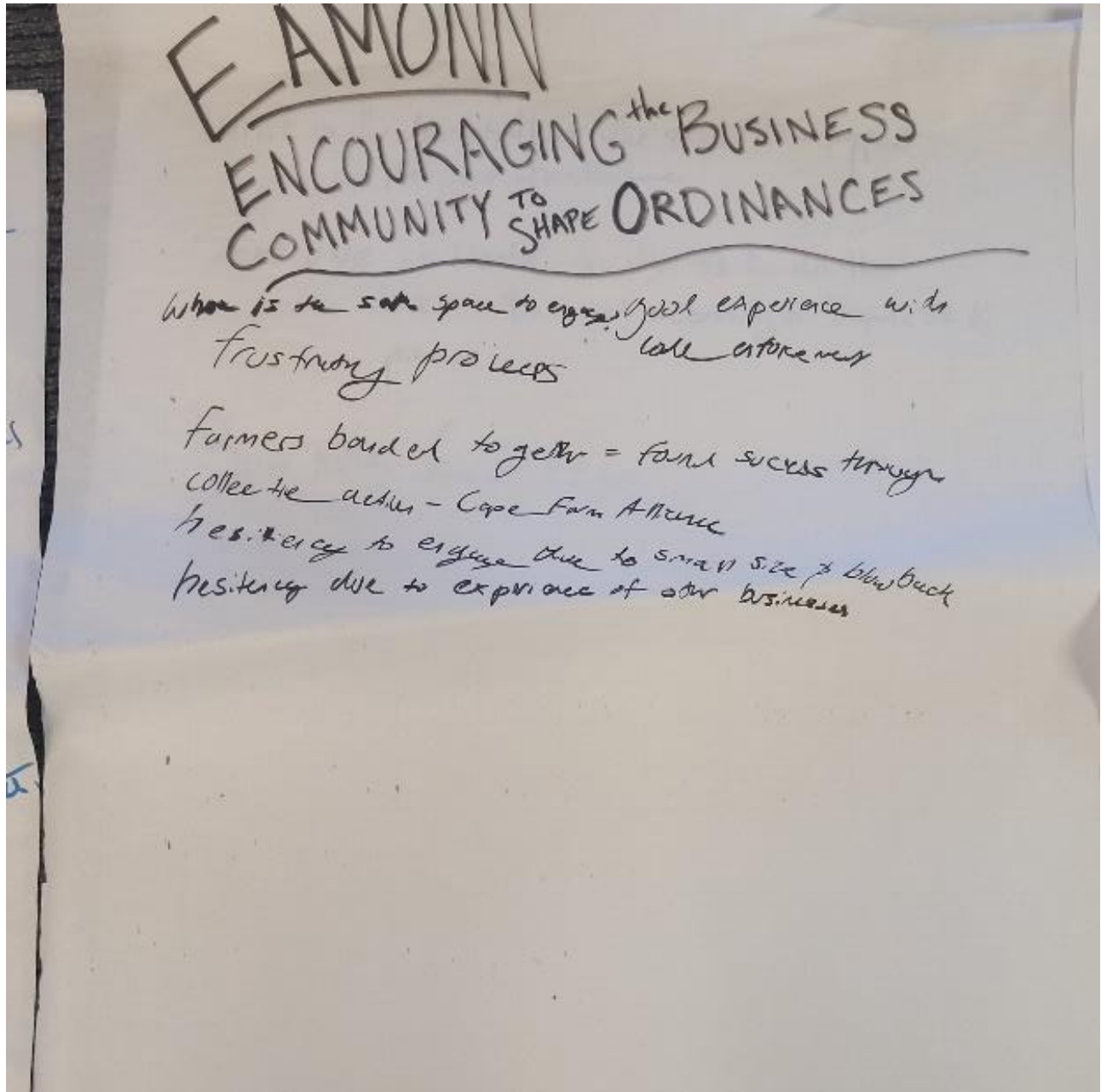
**Appendix**

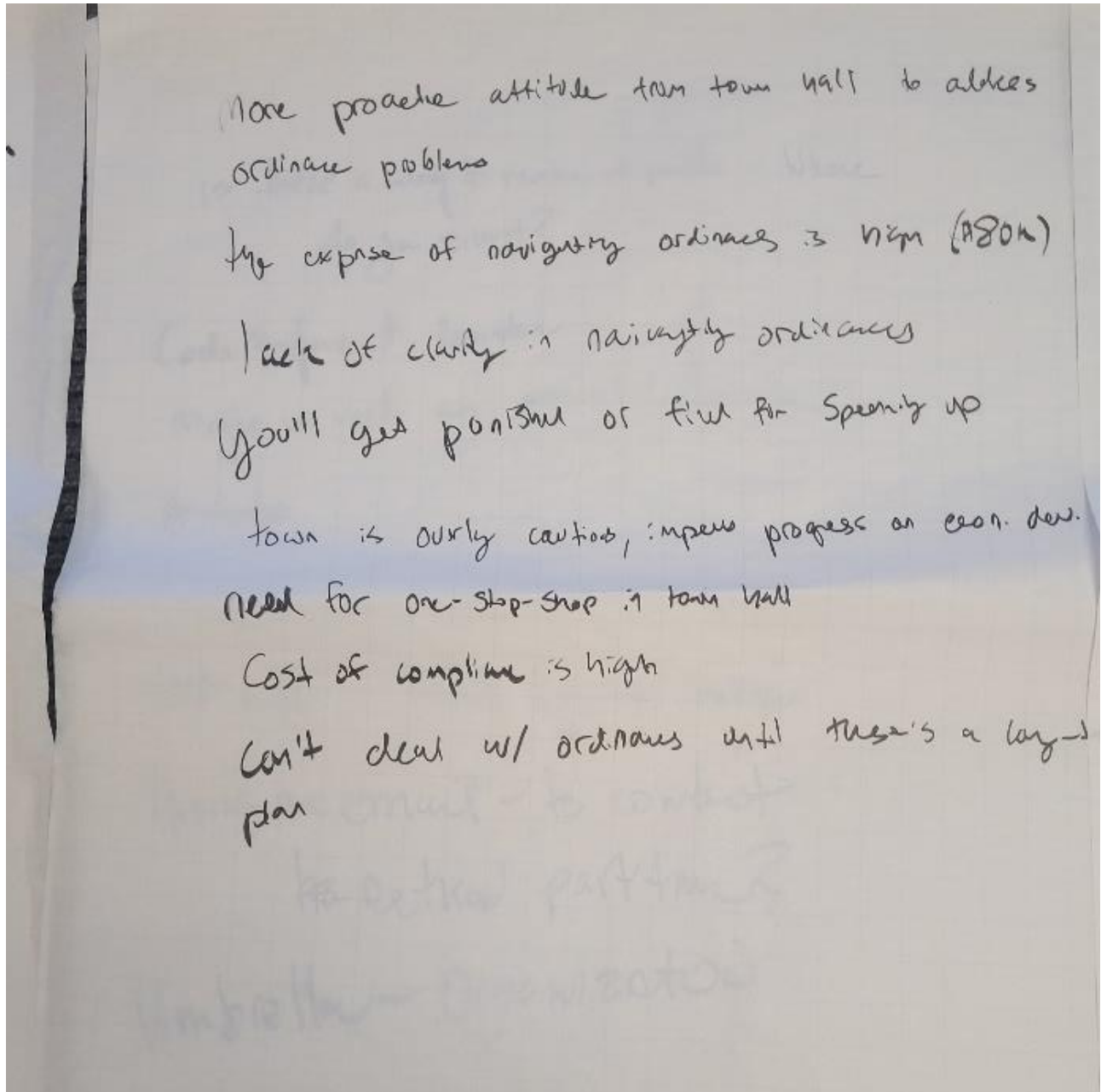
Attached are pictures of all the notes taken by the facilitators. PLEASE NOTE: Two of the pictures from Christian Roadman’s group were corrupted and unable to upload.



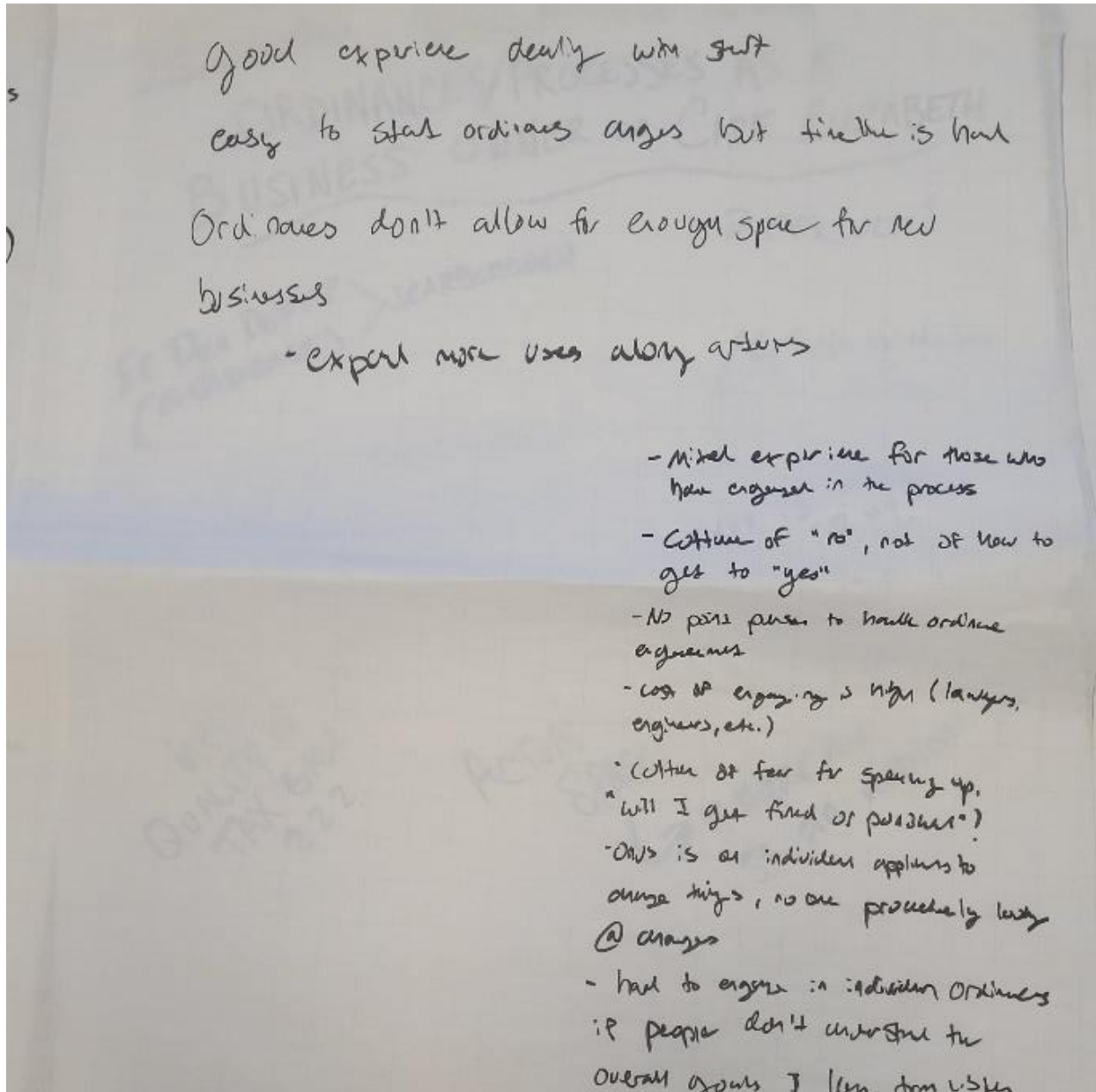


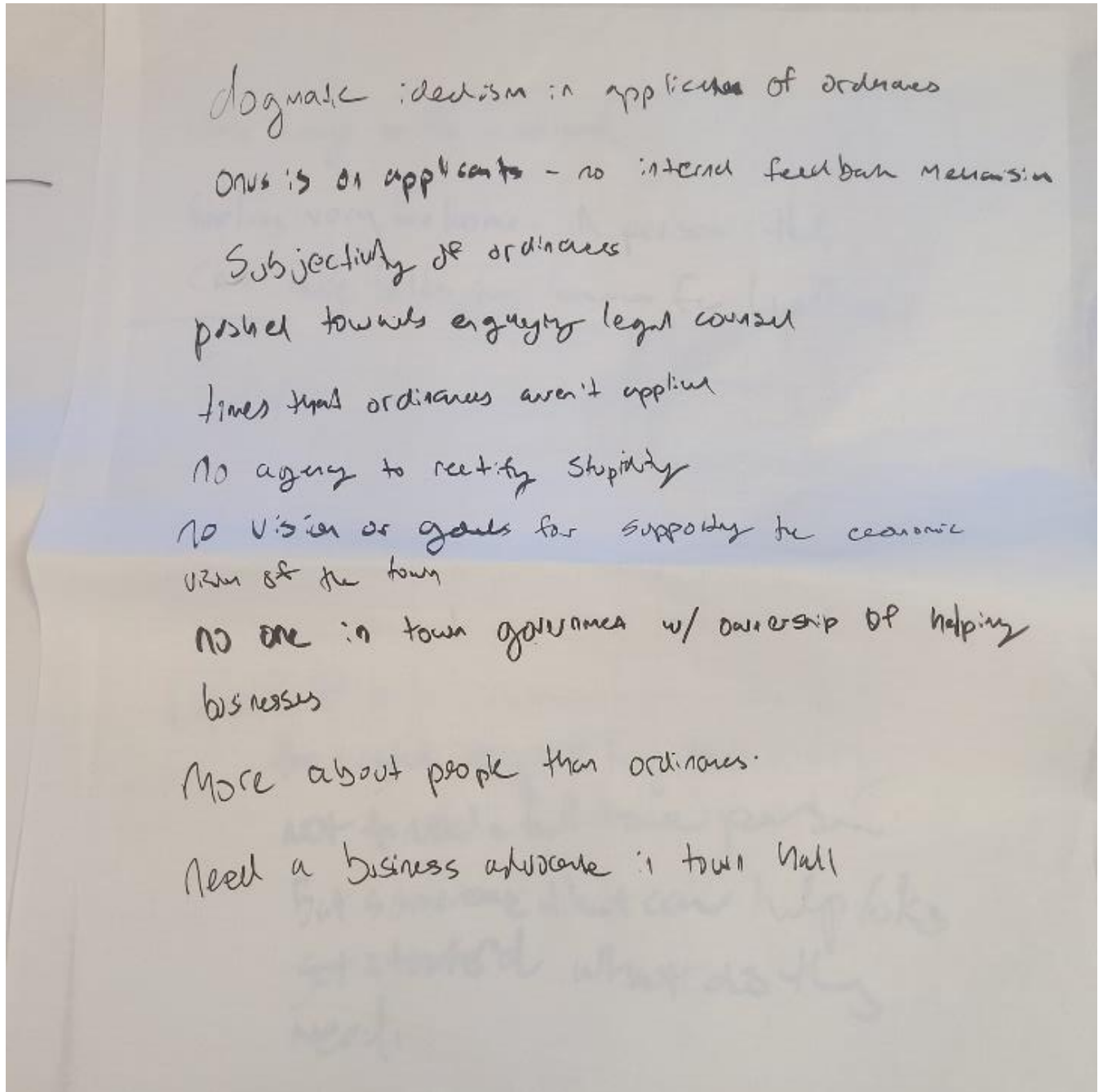












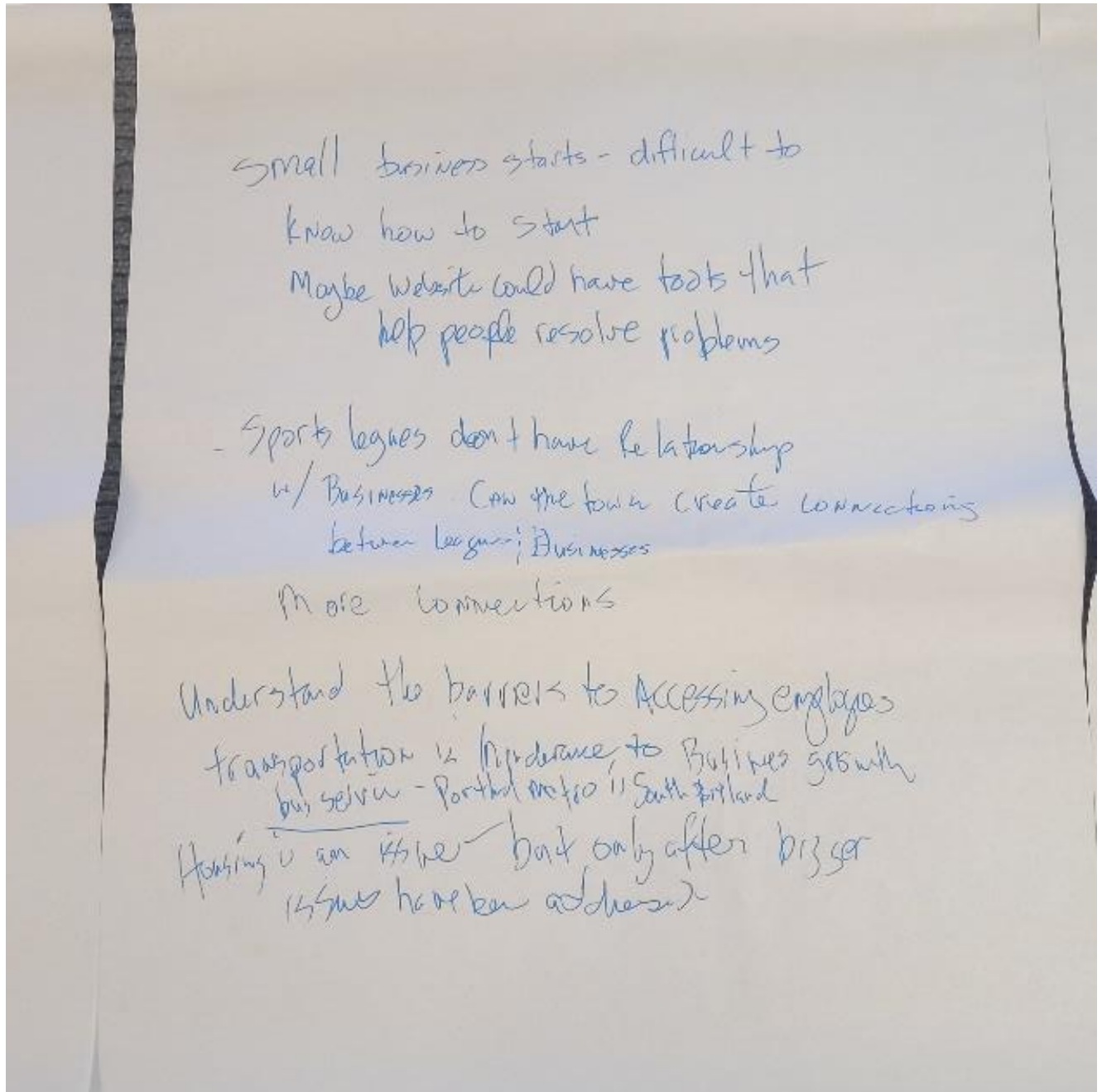
A Vision would validate some level of Business - we do need an Economic Development Staff.

Culture Change - We want to encourage Business.

- Need Better allotment of time @ Planning Board

Stream lining of follow-up from pre-up meetings

focus has to be on New Development



Small business starts - difficult to  
know how to start  
Maybe website could have tools that  
help people resolve problems

- Sports leagues don't have relationship  
w/ Businesses. Can the town create connections  
between leagues & Businesses  
More connections

Understand the barriers to Accessing employees  
transportation is important to Business growth  
bus service - Portland metro is South Portland  
Housing is an issue - but only after bigger  
issues have been addressed

Is there a way to make it public - Where do you start?

Code Enforcement. Assistant

Maybe we need an assistant planner

A helper

"Business Coordinators"

~~EPA~~ CEI - Other Regional Services

Having an email - to contact  
~~the~~ retired part time?

Umbrella - Organization

## Volunteer Opportunities like SCORE

~~Funding the~~

Tasks -

- FINDING funding for businesses
- Grant funds for startup Businesses
- Navigate Codes & Ordinances
- Help walk through ordinances Appeals, charges etc

enforcement stuff may not be the right  
stuff for these folks

~~Advocate~~ <sup>Navigate</sup> Ordinances for

Impression that staff is focused on enforcement  
rather than ~~advocate~~ <sup>Navigate</sup> business assistance

More ways to be involved

feeling very welcome - A person that  
CAN help folks/new towns feel welcome

Reliable the services - but  
we have code officer/planner

But that's the problem -

Looked @ other communities - We have  
the right department - We may  
not need a full time person  
But someone that can help folks  
get started what do they  
need.

Help to define goals - identify  
road blocks, ~~to~~ help facilitate  
what the Town Wants.

What does the person know.

Staff needs to provide education for everybody

Staff - 1/4 or 1/2 time on economic development.

Inventory of Businesses

Visit Businesses on Weekly Basis.

! Resources for Businesses - Could connect Business  
w/ the right services.

- Is there a need - how does a business access  
demographics & needs.

- Form a Road Map by looking @ Town Assets

- Fiscal Analysis to determine if Business can improve  
ability



