

Survey: What businesses and recreation would EB employees like in New London?

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With Electric Boat scheduled to hire thousands of workers over the next decade, the New London Roundtable recently surveyed current EB employees to see what businesses and recreational activities they'd be interested in seeing in the Whaling City.

And the results?

Among them: A lot of the respondents are interested in live events where they can socialize, whether at musical festivals or food strolls. They're looking for the opportunity to hike and bike. Indeed, outdoor activities, from water activities to outdoor dining, are popular. The venues they currently frequent most often in downtown New London are restaurants and bars.

As for what types of businesses they'd like in downtown New London, the top answers were: shops (Mom & Pop stores, upscale boutiques, gift shops, coffee shops, clothing, hike/bike/walk shop, brew/micro-brew pubs), and restaurants (healthy/organic food, tapas, gastropubs, upscale).

The New London Roundtable was organized by the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, and coalition co-chair Preston Whiteway says the largest takeaway from the survey is that the things the respondents wish were in New London actually are already there.

"So clearly we're not getting the word out, which is a much easier issue to solve than we have to build it from the get-go because we don't have it. So what's exciting is we're doing a lot of things right, the city is on the right path," he says.

The results will be shared with the roundtable in a meeting this Thursday.

The New London Roundtable consists of New London arts and culture, business, community, city and educational representatives. It was set up a year ago to capitalize on "this enormous transformative moment approaching for New London," says Whiteway, who is also the executive director of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center.

He cites as the four main elements of that approaching moment: the significant EB hiring, the Coast Guard Museum development, the magnet school plan for New London, and the city's infrastructure transformation.

The survey questions and responses included:

- What things do you do when you're not working or taking care of errands or sleeping? Social activities with friends and family was the most popular response, at 31.40 percent, followed by hiking/biking/walking at 14.92 percent.

- Other than being at home, where are you most likely to spend your free time? Nearby towns (Mystic, Groton, Waterford) earned the most votes, with 61.86 percent. Downtown New London received 8.47 percent.
- What types of activities are you most interested in after work and on weekends? Walk/hike/bike led the responses, with 17.26 percent, followed next by festivals at 14.6 percent and food events at 14.28 percent.
- Do you buy tickets to music, arts and cultural events? 73.68 percent said yes, with the highest percentage of the yeses coming from ages 51 and up.
- Of those who said they attend arts, culture and music activities in New London the most, the highest percentage was 51 years old or older and then declining by age to 25-year-olds and under. The percentage of people buying tickets to music, arts and cultural events increased with age.
- Reasons for not spending more time in downtown New London? Transportation/parking came in first, at 23.54 percent, with safety concerns at 16.73 percent and more interested in other nearby towns at 14.01 percent.

Here's the genesis of the survey: A roundtable meeting last spring featured EB director of strategic planning Thomas Plante and Connecticut director of culture from the Department of Economic and Community Development Kristina Newman-Scott. She discussed the value of the arts and cultural community as an economic driver and its ability to help attract and retain employees. He spoke about EB's upcoming hiring and design process. Not only will the company be employ new engineers for design, but it will also be bringing in replacements for senior employees who plan on retiring. Between those two categories, EB will be hiring between 8,000 and 10,000 people over the next 10 years for sites in New London, Groton and Quonset Point, R.I.

Members of the roundtable were interested in what current EB employees — including newly hired millennials — think of New London, where exactly they spend their time, and what sorts of activities or retail outlets they wished existed in the city.

So the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition prepared survey questions. EB executives gave input and approval, and the coalition hosted the online survey. It went to every EB employee in New London, Groton and Rhode Island.

The survey received more than 1,500 responses. In addition, a lot of people wrote comments when given the option of expanding on a multiple-choice answer.

Wendy Bury, the cultural coalition's executive director, says of the survey results, "For us, it was great insight to know the coalition's work is on track as well to help these organizations learn how to engage with younger audiences."

As Whiteway noted, a good deal of what the respondents wanted is already here. For instance, New London already offers food strolls, the Hygienic hosts outdoor concerts, and there are music events on Waterfront Park. There are hiking trails and bike shops in the city.

"Perhaps we're just not advertng well enough. The place where folks said they learned about events in New London were the banners on Route 32 after you get off the highway coming into the city," Whiteway says, adding that, while the banners might be effective, they are only advertising, say, one or two events a month.

Is a possible answer to hang more banners around the city? Or to showcase events on a billboard near EB's New London facility? Or to add banners to EB's lobby? Or, as Bury notes, since many younger people are mobile-focused, are the businesses and arts organizations reaching them in a way that makes sense in those platforms?

The respondents had a good deal to say about parking in the city, too. The parking issue, Whiteway notes, is something that city and EB officials are working collaboratively.

In one survey, a person wrote, "We need more to do all year long with parking that is accessible even in the winter."

Coalition co-chair Lisa McGinley, The Day's former deputy managing editor who is now a member of the paper's editorial board, talks about thinking of parking as an enabler for people to spend time in the city, something that allows those who work in New London to get to know their environs instead of getting in their car after work and driving right out of the city.

A concrete example of how limited parking affects people working in the city: One EB employee wrote that he comes to work early because he wants to get a parking space and thus leaves early; when he leaves early, it's too early to go to, say, a bar or to other typical post-work activities.

Here are a few of the other wide-ranging comments submitted with the surveys: "I really enjoy restaurants with outdoor seating, we have such an amazing location it is a shame that we don't have more nice bistros, bar and grills and cafes 'on the water'. Another thing that would be amazing is a shopping 'hub' that gives you the downtown Mystic or Cape Cod feel." "Is there a kayaking club in NL?" "(I'd like to see the) return of free music concerts at city pier." And this suggestion: "Discount days where you can get coupons for different businesses in New London and see what is really there."

The next step, Whiteway says, is to have the business community dive into the survey data and determine how it applies to them.

"Everybody needs to be thinking about how to use what we can gather from the survey in an innovative way, which might mean stepping outside of their comfort zone in how they've normally done marketing, advertising and programming," Bury says.

While EB is a major employer in New London, it's not the only one. Whiteway says an interesting next step might be opening up a survey like this to other institutions.

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