



## Historical Societies Convening January 17, 2019 Westport Historical Society

On January 17, 24 attendees from all 17 historical societies in coastal Fairfield County met at Westport Historical Society for an “historic” gathering, organized by the Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County, working with New Canaan and Westport Historical Societies.

The session began with introductions and statements of strengths, successes and challenges (best represented by the accompanying chart - also available [here](#)). A recording of the session is also available.

Some of the notable commonalities were:

**Strengths:** 10 of the 17 cited their buildings and 6 their collections as strengths.

**Successes:** 6 societies successes were building-related

**Challenges:** 5 cited “membership,” 5, “engagement” and 4 “connecting with young people” as challenges (and these were often interconnected). Otherwise 4 cited funding, 3 their board, 2 balancing between different priorities and 2 the challenge of having no local newspaper.

After lunch:

### 1. Memberships

Many offered “renewals” and most had different levels. Many didn’t have benefits to go along with higher levels - and some said they could use ideas on this. **New Canaan** had many levels (from \$50 to \$25,000). Some were thinking of increasing but worried about sustainability. Lowest was \$15 - many thought that was too low. **Greenwich:** Always have \$100+ level. **Stamford:** get more at higher rate by not nickel-and-diming for programs and events; at \$250 everything is free - that increased # of larger donors.

Membership cards: several have them but admit people forget them and have to have lists at the door. Some get memberships at the door, if people can get in free.

Benefits: newsletters, membership meetings, discounted/free admission/programs. **Fairfield:** thinks most don’t do cost/benefit analysis, just want to “support the organization.”

**Darien:** developed a “Leadership Society” with a pin (gold and red saltbox house model).; considering preferred parking, preferred seating, advanced program notice. **Westport:** discovered

the power of “exclusivity:” Announce a program with a limited # of people as “exclusive” and it sells out fast. What “private” things can you offer for certain membership levels? “Experiences” always win out (who cares about 10% discounts at gift store?).

**Jewish HS:** \$400 Life Membership (basic is \$36) but not worth it.

**2. Annual Appeal:** JHS uses a very amped up letter (“imagine life without us”; not what we do, but what we do for you). **Stamford** guilts its members - pointing out that SHS gives free educational programs in the schools to and has had a positive impact. **New Canaan:** gave up town-wide mailing as so expensive (folded letter, return envelope, bumper sticker, mailing list; postage; collating services=\$5000 for \$5600 return). **Westport:** did oversized multilingual holiday card with a return envelope for just \$900. Will share name of the service that did it. **Easton:** doing it all on social media and email to see how it works. Facebook gives almost instant response, while website appeal is very slow. You can also target audiences on FB.

### 3. Marketing

**Darien:** Interested that when people in, say, their mid-30s show up unexpectedly at the museum, and they are asked how they knew about the exhibit, the answer is mostly Instagram and the glossy Moffly magazines - no newspaper, no FB.

**New Canaan:** NG as new director got her son to start an Instagram account, and was amazed how quickly people followed the account. Two young members now style themselves “Social Media Directors,” post every day and New Canaan has 1000+ followers.

**Easton:** Bruce Nelson pointed out it was hard work finding something interesting everyday to post. Views are one thing but you need “engagements” (Easton averages 30% engagement).

**Westport:** Learned that often the oddities that staff find interesting the general public also responds to. Just a picture of “something we just discovered in the archive” gets a lot of engagement and comments - so don’t underestimate what you look at everyday. Also, humor works really well.

**New Canaan:** Have a “Did You Know?” section once a week on facts about New Canaan.

**Westport:** Recommend giving some space in newsletters etc to share what’s going on at other historical societies.

### 4. Membership Part 2

**Greenwich:** Floated idea of offering reciprocal free admission for members to other member societies. Would they value membership more if they saw they could go to other societies for free? There was a wave of agreement from those who charged admission.

**Westport:** This would mean members would need cards. Westport looking into digital cards. Working with **Cuseum** in creating digital versions of their exhibits and there was an opportunity to do digital cards - which would help with getting younger members.

**Darien:** If all agreed, then this could be a “Passport” for kids to all the societies in the region.

**Fairfield:** This reminded Beth of the Scavenger Hunt in which several societies worked together and there was a passport that you got stamped at each location.

**New Canaan:** struggling with various membership levels. 30% at \$100; 40% \$50 and 30% all other levels. Tempted to eliminate the \$50. Ramin: \$50 is our best level ("family"). Another said \$60, also "family" was biggest category (thinking of raising to \$75). Admission prices for non-members: \$5; Stamford's is \$10. **Westport:** never had admission but Ramin instituted \$5 rate, and thinking of raising. People are coming and paying.

**Stamford:** charges a library fee (\$15) for use of library for research into houses and families, as well as a photocopy fee (50¢/page). Membership is attractive to those who use the facilities.

**Westport:** charges a research fee (\$45/hr for trained researcher on staff to do research).

## 5. Exhibits

**Stratford(?):** Feel not providing enough new and exciting material in order to charge admission - so where to start? **Westport:** Used to do 4 exhibits a year, and maybe once every 2 or 3 years there was a really good one. Moved to a once-a-year, with all the money going into the one exhibit, and then micro-exhibits in the smaller spaces.

## 5. Fundraising

**Stamford:** one way of raising funds is accepting the stuff people bring in, and organizing a monster tag sale. SHS puts one on every May that nets \$5,000-6,000. Have to have donors sign off to allow the society to do what they want with it. **Westport:** Working with an auction house, they had an un-accessioned painting they put up for auction and got \$10,000.

**Stamford:** A tag sale also brings people into the building and will often become new members.

## 6. Capital Campaign

**Greenwich:** Debra Mecky described the GHS capital campaign for its new campus. The key factor was having a board member who had consistently donated for decades and who wanted the organization to fulfil its masterplan vision. GHS was running out of space (for parking, for collection storage, for exhibits) and there was the opportunity to buy a building strategically placed near the campus. Once one person was committed to seeing the plan through, others joined in. Initially, no idea what the price tag would be. Conducted building studies, programmatic studies, community studies and came up with \$13.5 million. Did a feasibility study and engaged external consultant. The one donor committed to \$7million and a promise to match all other donations. Board thus was only approving a \$7 million campaign. Hired external capital campaign company to help (\$100,000/year was included in campaign bid). Overall it took 3 years. One impact was it reduced annual giving amounts, and then GHS was advised to build in three-years+ of operating funds into the capital campaign to counteract this "Capital Campaign Donor Fatigue Effect." So the total goal was boosted to \$15.5 million total: \$10 million for the building, the rest into a Program Enrichment Fund. Then GHS realized it should have added an Endowment appeal to sustain the new campus. So an endowment campaign was added towards the end of the overall campaign.

## 7. Funding and Exhibits.

**Stratford:** How do you find sponsors? Stratford currently looking for significant funds to get up-and-running. They have invited the mayor, the Chamber of Commerce, churches, “but nobody wants to give us a dime.”

**New Canaan:** We go door-to-door. Put together a brochure for an exhibit and go around town visiting and asking businesses, retail, real estate - and they love it if you have a big sign acknowledging donors and including their names in a press releases. Last exhibit cost \$2500.

**Stratford:** “Where do you get your exhibits?” Answers: From collections and loans. **Norwalk:** it depends on what story you want to tell, based on what’s in your collection - and sometimes you borrow. **Stamford:** currently working on a research-based exhibit on Stamford’s houses of worship, so visiting every congregation in town. It’s a lot of foot-slogging but you are meeting people you would never otherwise have met. They find out about us, loan us materials and get involved.

**Westport:** I look at this as a journalist: you call around and discover who has useful and interesting materials/stories. Use students - offer them the research opportunity, create an internship program. students the opportunity. Conduct an intern program to do your research. For fundraising for exhibits - decide who is most appropriate to make the ask. Ramin not going to meet with someone unless its a \$10,000 potential donor. For \$500 for a program, my program director goes and asks. Figure out who on your board or your volunteers will tell the best story-

**Stratford:** “The complexion of what we’re dealing with is so out-of-sync with what I’m hearing from you.” **Westport:** so you have a board problem - and that’s a bigger problem. Issues are different for different societies. **New Canaan:** find out what you’re passionate about and are willing to work on and then find a friend outside the society who’s willing to help you. **Stratford:** “We don’t know where to start.” **New Canaan:** Start with the idea. What’s the story? And then if you care about it, you can sell it. But if you don’t know what it is, no-one’s going to listen.

**Darien:** Story of a man walking in, whose mother was a great sculptor. We were able to hire Kathie Bennewitz, the Westport-based curator, brought her on, we thought we had a great story to tell, and we ended up breaking even. So with the story we could then go to sponsors.

## 8. Next steps

After some discussion about various possibilities it was generally agreed that we should meet quarterly (April, July, October and January) and organize a number of “taskforces” around key issues. The groups would meet and discuss for an hour and then report out to the plenary group. Nancy Geary offered New Canaan as a venue, which, with its many rooms, would accommodate different groups.

Topics were agreed to be:

- Fundraising
- Programming
- Exhibits
- Marketing + social media
- Membership
- Board Development