

Pelham Planning Board
Public Hearing: West Pelham Town Center Proposal
February 26, 2018

Called to order at 7:04 pm and adjourned at 8:47 pm

Planning Board Members present: Abbie Jenks, Chair, Pete Wilson, Lexi Dewy, Leslie Laurie, Judy Eiseman (recording) Sign in sheet for general public attendees attached.

Abbie Jenks gave a brief overview of the process the Board has undertaken to date and the status of the proposal. She indicated the Board's desire to hear and answer questions that attendees have at this stage. Among the points she made as part of this introduction, she noted that the existence of the sewer line makes more kinds of development possible. Also, with the financial struggles in town, this may be one way over time to create another revenue source even if relatively small. More importantly, in some ways this proposal gives us a chance to develop a deeper sense of community and communication among citizens and to develop an identity for the town while preserving its rural character.

Abbie noted that Dillon Sussman from PVPC has been the Board's consultant and we have worked for three years to bring this first phase of the project to fruition. Drawing upon past studies and surveys, the Board has settled on these initial measures to create the potential for change in a particular area around the school and library. Abbie briefly described the proposed zones, including requirements for lot size, open space design, and reorganization of the zoning document that constitute both major and minor changes being offered to voters. During the next phase, the Board will look at the costs and feasibility of bringing the sewer into streets off Amherst Road and will develop regulations, protocols and fee schedules to implement the zoning if it passes with the required 2/3 vote at Town Meeting.

Abbie and other Board members indicated that we recognize that change will happen as individual owners or others make decisions. We expect things to happen slowly over time and that although what will be proposed is not completely predictable, the decision making process with required special permits and site plan review should ensure thoughtful planning and pleasing results. Any plans brought before the Board will afford opportunity for the public to contribute and to have an influential voice in the outcome.

Finally, before opening the hearing to comments and questions, Abbie made three final points:

- Grants for financial and other assistance are being sought and the Board has already received a grant from PVPC to study the "complete streets" needs for the Village Center (traffic calming, bike paths and a safe walking area.)
- The Amherst Water Department sees Pelham as a client which they will serve although sewer capacity is not unlimited and is costly so expansion will be limited in the foreseeable future unless revenue sources are identified.
- The Board will be working on stormwater management proposals and intends to have them ready by fall town meeting.

Questions and concerns raised by those attending the hearing with some responses offered by Board members.

- How much outreach has been made to neighbors in this area? What are their reactions?
- Will taxes go up?
- We don't want the kind of architectural nightmares here that Amherst is allowing.
- Will this encourage affordable housing?
- Noise and lighting concerns raised.
- Are UMass satellite rentals going to be easier; how will that work?
- Is the Board mindful that with denser development traffic and the potential for eyesores could increase?
- How can changes be made to this once we pass this zoning change?
- Should detached residential buildings on one lot in the rest of town be made possible?
- Concern about zoning and whether consolidating lots and ownership would "spread" the Village Center zoning allowing it to cross the river (Buffam Brook.)
- A former Planning Board member cautioned the Board to be careful because "developers have no heart" and changing zoning to make subdivisions more possible would cause damage to the community.

Alisa Pearson, South Valley Road expressed concern about what might be coming in the future relative to energy and the environment as well as the need to address stormwater issues. She noted both the cost and the difficulty of refitting old houses and buildings and a desire to make an effort to encourage energy efficiency. Are new buildings going to have to be built to net zero standards? Has Board considered requiring strong energy saving building requirements?

Gregory Chilenski said he was very enthusiastic about the changes (he has a home occupation and has submitted an application to the ZBA to have an accessory attached apartment.) He expressed appreciation that at the Planning Board seems to be trying to allow aging in place to take place here. One resident said she thought it "builds allies" to know that Pelham is not going to look like Amherst.

Joe Larson rose to give a slightly different perspective saying that zoning is supposed to deal with public health and safety. Large lot zoning is required in Pelham because of the type of land we have here — ledge, wetlands, headwaters to streams, as well as private wells, septic systems—all require more space to ensure public health and well being and a need for watershed protection. However, with the advent of the sewer serving a portion of the town, he said, our zoning must deal with maintaining control over what happens with the new situation or it becomes open to legal challenge. Since existing zoning currently applies in the proposed Village Center area, we have both the opportunity and the obligation to make some change in what is permitted. Joe noted that much of this area would qualify as a state historic district but that would not give us the control that zoning will. He would like to see the historical commission work with the Planning Board on a project to create an historic district—which will require a super majority of the people who live there and would allow certain kinds of restrictions.

Summary of responses offered by Planning Board members.

Multiple mailings have been sent and meetings held with the response from residents in the proposed Village Center mostly quite positive. Taxes will not necessarily be affected as it will depend upon what changes actually occur to properties. A lot of properties and buildings currently in the proposed Village Center are non-conforming and this proposal will make it easier in some instances for people to do certain things on their properties as a matter of right even though special permits and site plan review may be required.

It is expected that the presence of the sewer will drive development on Amherst Road first, but there are environmental and topographical constraints. The Planning Board won't be dictating every aspect of design and size, but we may be able to negotiate so that the outcome will be optimal and appropriate to the surrounding area. We are creating possibility for affordable housing—which is not the same as the state's definition—and are attempting to make it possible for both younger and older people to come to live or remain in town.

As to noise and lighting concerns, we have attempted to address these issues and will do our best to ensure that standards will be met and maintained. We expect further changes or amendments to occur as the project moves forward and we gain experience with the sorts of projects brought forward for review by the Board. Rental units may be more possible, but we have regulations in place already that discourage non-resident ownership for rentals.

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