

## **My thoughts about the future direction of business zoning in Bedford**

### **- *A Letter to the Editor from Bedford resident Amy Lloyd***

Article 3 at Monday's town meeting inspired passionate debate and revealed the deep emotions shared by Bedford's citizens about the value of our town. Economic development, streetscape character, and tax revenue are vitally important topics, and zoning changes intended to address one item can cause unexpected reverberations in other areas. As a member of the Planning Board, I am in complete agreement that these issues must be given careful study. Now that I've had some time to digest the concerns expressed Monday, I'd like to share some thoughts.

First, a brief illumination on how zoning bylaws are created.

In Massachusetts, Planning Boards serve as the "administrator" as it were, of the zoning bylaw process. Sometimes, it is a Planning Board that will – after detailed study, analysis, and public input – bring a proposal to their Selectmen for consideration to become a Warrant Article. The Selectmen alone have the authority to decide whether or not to accept the petition for the warrant. If they accept it as an article, then the matter goes back to the Board, who are mandated by state law to, within 86 days, hold one or more public hearings and then produce a report for Town Meeting. Finally, the proposal is brought to Town Meeting for the voters' consideration.

Occasionally however, a private landowner will make an effort to change a bylaw by writing their own proposal, and then seeking the Selectmen's permission to include it on the Warrant. If the Selectmen choose to accept this petitioner's article, then, even though it is not their initiative, the Planning Board is still the body responsible for holding the required public meeting and producing a report within the required timeframe. This, of course, was how Article 3 came into existence.

Though flawed, Article 3 did bring much needed attention to our antiquated business district zoning. Just a sampling of the problems:

- ♦ Both existing business zoned districts apply a one-size-fits-all approach, treating shopping centers, small strip malls, historic structures, and stand-alone stores the same. This zoning was originally enacted from several Town Meeting votes in the late 1950's and early 1960's; it is terribly outdated by current standards.
- ♦ The district boundaries were drawn as straight lines, irrespective of existing parcels: there are many lots (including residences on side streets) split between two zones, often causing burdensome regulatory complications.
- ♦ The currently allowed uses leave us potentially vulnerable to some very undesirable businesses: providing it remains under 2000 square feet, a tattoo parlor would not be prohibited in Limited Business, for example.
- ♦ I would also point out that this existing zoning is what permitted the original Marketplace strip mall to be built in the center of town in the first place.

Practically speaking, creating and revising zoning – particularly in an area as varied and complex as the Great Road business corridor – is a significant undertaking. It will be necessary to gather reams of data on the current conditions; analyze that data to learn how existing business areas differ in key ways; gather significant public input in a cycle of meetings; and craft a series of bylaw amendments that are carefully tailored for Bedford’s specific needs, conditions, and vision. Start to finish, this process can take up to two years. For projects this intricate, it is standard practice to contract with a specialized consulting firm. There are many benefits to this approach:

- ♦ Professionals with specific expertise in various areas of planning, design, and law will participate in the project;
- ♦ Consultants can work full time - progress isn’t “derailed” by increases in development activity or other Planning responsibilities;
- ♦ Non-vested consultants bring impartiality and a sense of calm to a sometimes emotional process.

It’s time to take a systematic and comprehensive look at the Great Road business corridor – from Shawsheen to Hillside – and craft rational zoning that enhances our community character, allows for calculated business development, and is customized to each specific district. I hope you will voice your support of this initiative to our town officials, and then cast a yes vote at Spring Town Meeting to fund this crucial initiative.

I welcome any questions or comments.

Thank you,  
Amy Lloyd

*Editor’s Note: Ms. Lloyd is a member and current Chair of the Planning Board, but she is speaking for herself in this letter*