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Center Town District restrictions concern East Longmeadow residents

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EAST LONGMEADOW

— Dozens of residents came to the Center Town District Steering Committee's first meeting on April 22 skeptical of the process and the project as a whole.

The town's 2021 Resilient Master Plan laid out goals for the center of town, specifically that it be made into an economic development hub, the walkability of the area be improved, and more diverse housing stock be built. To meet these

objectives, the town is pursuing a Center Town District focused around the rotary and hired the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission to aid a steering committee of residents in its work.

The establishment of a Center Town District would be separate from a 2019 bylaw allowing mixed-use villages in town. Pioneer Valley Planning Commission Senior Planner W. Kyle Finnell said that bylaw had stringent criteria that limited potential parcels for such development to just one — 330 Chestnut St. — relatively far from the town's center.

Finnell said East Longmeadow is "strongly positioned" to move forward with creating a Center Town District. Ten percent of parcels within a one-mile radius of the rotary are underdeveloped or vacant. Meanwhile, 58% is residential in nature.

What is 40R?

One potential method for designing the Center Town District is the use of the 2004 law known as Chapter 40R, which incentivizes mixed-use developments using "smart growth" zoning.

Several residents agreed when another said he was confused and put off by unfamiliar terms, such as "Smart Growth." Smart growth is a strategic method of developing communities to be socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. The idea is to use several strategies to develop a balanced community that allows for choices in transportation, housing, employment and amenities.

Pioneer Valley Planning Commission Planner Aodhan Hemeon-McMahon provided some examples of communities where smart growth has been applied, including Lexington, Concord, Newburyport and Marblehead in Massachusetts, and West Hartford and New Canaan in Connecticut. What they all have in common is that they are pedestrian-friendly, with transit options, economic opportunities and higher density in a mixed-use format. Such areas generate a character and "community core," Hemeon-McMahon said.

Housing

The town does not have to use 40R to create a Center Town District. Both Steering Committee ex-officio member Ralph Page and member Dawn Starks spoke about the possibility of rezoning the parcels in the area instead of utilizing an overlay district. The main benefit of pursuing a 40R district is that the state would provide a financial incentive of between \$10,000 and \$600,000, based on initial forecast of the number of housing units in the district. The law provides that \$3,000 would be provided for each unit built. Finnell said funding to offset any students who move into the district is also allotted. When asked by Starks, he acknowledged that the incentives are dependent on the budget and said municipalities have received 80% of the promised funding.

In exchange for the incentives, overlay districts under 40R include specific regulations, such as not restricting the age of residents and being in a "suitable" location with transit options. Another requirement is that it includes a minimum of 20% of units be classified as affordable housing. Deputy Town Manager Rebecca Lisi clarified for people attending the meeting that affordable housing is different from subsidized housing, in which people with low incomes pay 30% of their income towards rent, and the state or federal government pays the remaining amount of the housing cost. Instead, the income criteria for affordable housing is 80% or less of the area's median income. In East Longmeadow, this would apply to individuals with an annual income of \$61,350, paying a monthly rent of as much as \$1,534.

The PVPC is wrapping up a housing needs assessment for the town as a needed prerequisite to developing a housing production plan. Preliminary data shows that residents in East Longmeadow are "housing cost burdened." One-fifth of residents pay between 30% and 50% of their monthly income to housing costs, including rent or a mortgage and utilities. While it comes to renters, 27% spend more than half of their monthly income on housing needs.

Finnell noted that putting in place a housing production plan in the form of an overlay district would keep developers who may want to build subsidized housing from being able to sidestep the Planning Board under a separate state law.

Questions and comments

In a statement, Jim Leydon, a candidate for East Longmeadow Town Council, described 40R as "the state's concentrated affordable housing law" and said that receiving incentives for housing built in such developments is "giving up local control" over the town's character.

In his written statement, Leydon also took issue with the involvement of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, stating, "The future of East Longmeadow should be determined by its residents and not by out-of-town planners and deputy [town] manager."

However, because 40R applies specifically to overlay districts, Finnell and Hemeon-McMahon explained that the existing zoning bylaws remain in effect and can be used instead of the smart growth regulations. Beyond this, Lisi said resident input will decide what is allowed, including the style and height of buildings, and requirements for buffering, off-street parking, open spaces and sidewalks. Hemeon-McMahon noted that the restrictions cannot be "unreasonable."

At the meeting, Leydon asked if the town would be "compromised" by accepting the incentives. He pointed to Milton, which is being sued by the state for not adhering to the MBTA Communities Law and said East-West Rail would be a part of the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority. However, the service, which would connect Worcester with Albany via Springfield is being developed in partnership with Amtrak, rather than the MBTA. Finnell told him he was unaware of the state "reclaiming" 40R incentives.

Several other people at the meeting also expressed fear around the state having control of what is built in town beyond the laws and regulations to which East Longmeadow already must adhere.

More than one resident at the meeting equated higher density housing in the district with apartment buildings, but Lisi said the district is meant to address "missing middle housing," such as duplexes, fourplexes and townhomes. As it stands, 85.3% of the housing stock in East Longmeadow are detached single-family homes. The minimum density per acre within a 40R district is eight single family units, 12 duplex or triplex units, or 20 multi-family units.

George Kingston, who serves on the Historical Commission, asked how historical assets, such as single-family homes along Maple Street — many of which he said were over 100 years old — would be addressed. Lisi said the construction would be designed to "fill in the empty spaces" in the area, rather than necessarily demolish and redevelop existing properties.

Gregory Thompson opined that the financial benefits did not seem to be worth the restrictions to which the town would need to adhere. Steering Committee member Steven Graham asked about other methods of smart growth that are not linked to 40R. Finnell said there was "not a lot of momentum" around other strategies for creating mixed-use districts.

Page expressed concern about increasing traffic congestion, rather than decreasing it, as is called for in the Resilient Master Plan. Finnell said choosing the boundaries of the district would be key in mitigating any potential congestion. Another resident said more parking would be needed and called the idea for the district "ludicrous." He said the town should address the future of 330 Chestnut St. "and let the rest go."

When a person attending the meeting said he liked East Longmeadow the way it is and did not want to live in a "city," ex-officio committee member Robert Tirrell said he also liked the town as it is. "We're not looking to change anything drastic," he said, assuring the resident that the interest was in "small business retail" being developed.

At the end of the meeting, the Steering Committee and residents left comments on five preliminary options for Center Town District boundaries, which ranged from a small number of parcels immediately surrounding the rotary to a swath of land that stretched from 330 Chestnut St. to North Main Street near the Springfield border. One of the options had two separate "subdistricts," with one at the rotary and another around the shopping plazas on North Main Street. Hemeon-McMahon said the purpose of the exercise was to get people thinking, "What is downtown?" and "What parcels does that include?"

The next meeting will be on May 20. Lisi said she expects a larger turnout and would like those who attend from the community to break out into small groups to generate ideas. Graham asked Finnell and Hemeon-McMahon to include comments heard at this meeting in what is presented at the next one. He also said the Steering Committee needs to do a better job impressing upon people that the Center Town District is a work in progress, and nothing has been decided so far.

Starks admitted that she felt "lost in the process" and that the many moving pieces felt "fuzzy" to her. Town Manager Tom Christensen said it should feel fuzzy, as this was the Steering Committee's first meeting. He agreed with Graham that residents came to the meeting thinking decisions had already been made, but that was not the case.

There will also be an informal ice cream social on May 8 at The Depot at Graham Central Station, 60 Maple St., for members of the community to meet the Steering Committee members.

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