

The Falmouth Enterprise

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Devoted To The Interests Of The Falmouth Community

Troy's Take

Time For Some '90s-Style Collaboration

By TROY CLARKSON



When Main Street was renovated a generation ago and the overhead wires were moved to the back of the buildings, the sidewalks were widened and a more pedestrian-friendly ap-

proach was taken, the overhead lights were replaced with pedestrian-scale street lamps and Town Hall Square was reconfigured to the shape it is today, one of the overarching goals was to make our downtown a more walkable, shoppable and livable village center.

It worked. Today, Falmouth Village is used as an example throughout the commonwealth and indeed across the nation as a model of revitalization and what can happen when public and private investment come together with a common purpose. This project took both, as building owners were required to invest to move the poles and wires along with the town's multimillion-dollar infrastructure investment.

Helping the issue along were volunteers like Jim Bowen, Jean McCluskey and Bill Burwell, and visionary local government leaders like Heather Harper and Peter Boyer. I was able to learn from these notable veterans as a new member of the select board and chairman of the Main Street Revitalization Committee. The very idea for the project began with a meeting sponsored by Eric Turkington, suggesting that we needed to develop a sense of place. Tom Cahir shepherded the grant request through the commonwealth labyrinth as the Legislature's chairman of transportation. It was collaboration before that became a buzzword.

Today, the same sort of vision and collaboration and public-private

partnership are needed as the revitalization and redevelopment make their way east down Main Street. The current proposal for a significant investment and changes to the former Falmouth Nursing Home is a sound proposal that needs similar collaborative leadership to make it happen. The project has languished before the zoning board of appeals for some time. It is now time for the project to move forward.

In the select board's strategic plan, it addresses a project like this in a couple of different strategic goals. The first category in the current plan is Housing, and the introductory paragraph clearly denotes this as a policy priority for our chief elected officials. One of the goals in this housing section is, "Consider supporting a Planning Board proposal to broaden the scope of the Mixed Residential Commercial Overlay District (MRCOD) to allow greater zoning flexibility for permitting multifamily housing within the designated District." So, the board elected to represent us and steer the community in a collaborative and collective direction has identified this bylaw as a lynchpin in addressing housing issues.

Another goal is broader, but pinpoints the benefits of this kind of proposal by suggesting that the town, "Support business and community development to promote a vibrant local economy." What better way to support business and community development than to create more permanent and temporary housing in our downtown commercial district, where people can walk to shopping, restaurants and recreation and our seasonal workers can find a place to live? The select board has shown leadership in making housing a priority. The planning board reviewed this project, supported this project and created a zoning overlay district with just such a project in mind. The zoning board has asserted its review and oversight—some would

say unnecessarily—and has lost sight of the importance and value of the project in its commitment to an overly bureaucratic process.

A memo was recently drafted by the town's legal staff about the applicability of the MRCOD bylaw to this project. The memo has inexplicably been kept confidential. Remember, this bylaw was passed to encourage development, not to stop it. Frank Duffy, who retired after a stellar career as our town counsel, thinks the memo should be public. So do I—and I say that as both a columnist and a 30-year veteran of local government. Just a few weeks ago, we celebrated sunshine week, an annual event where transparency in government is highlighted and celebrated. Here, we have a legal opinion that may provide some light on how this important project can move forward but we are being eclipsed by a claim of privacy that is anything but transparent.

The Enterprise editorial got it right by observing that, "This is a good project. The zoning board members need to climb out of their trench and face reality: this is a creative use of an existing building that answers the call of the strategic goals ratified by Town Meeting."

The time for our Time For Some '90s-style collaboration is upon us. This project is part of an overall approach to creating sustainable housing in our downtown and should not and cannot be viewed—from both the perspectives of public policy and public permitting—in isolation. Rather, this project should and must be viewed against the backdrop of more than 30 years of planning and development that started with our efforts in the mid-'90s. The project meets the select board's strategic goals. It meets our needs as a community. It meets our dire need for housing. The zoning board should take the long—and the appropriate—view and move this project forward now.