

March 18, 2023

To: Stow Planning Board Members

From: Nancy Arsenault

Re: Take Aways from CPTC Conference, particularly about **“Rethinking the Strip Mall.”**

Attending the MAPC conference on Saturday was a great experience with so much learned and so much inspiration from the content presented in the sessions to the conversations with Planning Board members from other municipalities.

My most valuable session was “Rethinking the Strip Mall”, presented by the Massachusetts Land Use Planning Director, who is also a strip plaza owner. I have highlighted some statements in bold that we may want to consider incorporating into our presentation in some way, based on the information he offered.

This session described the reality that strip malls and small town plazas are breathing their last breath for a number of reasons; many that we mention in the presentation on Lower Village Bylaws. (see attachment #1 Why Strip Malls)

In January 2022, he and his colleagues created a study of small town and suburban strip malls, numbering over 3,000 covering a total of 14 square miles.

The maps attached with this memo ( attachment #2 and #3)show the locations of strip malls within the MAPC district, and in the second map, highlights the Town of Stow. In our community, this study determined the town is ripe for retail redevelopment and according to his commentary, Stow and others like us have a **very short expected life span for our retail properties IF redevelopment is not prioritized.**

After the seminar, I was able to access the interactive portion of their data report and pull out the information for Stow specific. The group found 4 sites in Stow, ripe for redevelopment: sites not unfamiliar to us. Number one on their list for Stow is 108-118 Great Road, which may be our first redeveloped site if things continue to move forward.

Next, the report focused on 117 Great Road, the Stow Shopping Plaza. Both of those north and south located properties were described as “Most Favorable” for the most success as a “Retail Retrofit Site”.

In spot #3 is 132 Great Road, the two story mixed use building on the western side of the Curtis Septic property. There are retail sites at ground level and office suites on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor.

Lastly, they identified 8 Hudson Rd, Buscemi’s Liquor Store and 626 Great Road, the Gulf Station, as parcels also with redevelopment potential, though not highly favorable.

The seminar featured successful “rethinking” of plazas in many towns, but Marlborough is one of the most successful, rezoning most retail plazas, strip malls etc to be mixed use. Mixed use housing has already been constructed on formerly retail-only parcels. New retail establishments, many locally based, have been attracted to the residential element of these parcels and they are enjoying a better rate of occupancy than many surrounding communities.

While residents often think that storefronts need to be occupied to increase tax revenue for the Town, the property owners pay tax based upon square footage, not if a store is empty or occupied. **On our own social media sites, I have seen this same misconception stated over and over. Perhaps we need to address this specifically in the narrative of the presentation.**

Instead of focusing solely on retail, this seminar urged communities to work with property owners to create mixed use opportunities; places where small housing units can be constructed while still permitting an active retail area. **This type of mixed use, provides a new, continual revenue stream for the property owners, when retail may not be such a sure thing and an ADDITIONAL tax resource for the Town, by square footage increasing at these locations. Bringing in retail tenants to already existing space, does not increase tax revenue for the Town.**

For those in our community concerned about the long term success and viability of our retail properties for the owners, allowing mixed use residential development in Lower Village Business District is a new creative approach to this dilemma.

When creating bylaws to support these long term visions, he recommended using terms like “allow” rather than “require” in some cases, offering more opportunity for towns to work alongside developers and property owners to create a shared vision. Said “allow” has received more favorably than “require” even though the same resolution originally desired with “require” can still be achieved.

While doing some research, I found two online pages showing how Linear is currently marketing the plaza property, though it has not been updated to reflect most recent vacancies. There is a page solely featuring the former Papa Gino’s site. (attachment “Linear”)

Also, which may come as a surprise to many residents, the Villages at Stow site at 117 and Harvest Road is also being actively marketed. That site is promoted as having a public water supply and on site treatment facility and the ability to locate a 10,000 sq ft property there. (attachment “Villages”)

One of the strongest points I took from this seminar is that many many communities are already deep into the redevelopment process, even other small towns like Stow. Several are in second and third rounds of redevelopment with real evidence of how the mixed use zoning transformed dying retail areas.

This was just one seminar.

Everything I attended was well worth the time. Learning the nitty gritty of Planning Board work, terms, responsibilities, Mass General Law applications, along with those assignments given to the Zoning Board, was very useful in a seminar given by Bob Mitchell, whom I think the Board is familiar with.

The session that addressed Drafting Zoning Amendments was also very good and I saw that Stow is definitely at the top echelon of communities concerning these processes. Everything that was stated as being required, suggested, preferred, - we are doing.

Just some comments I wanted to share.....