



Lower Village Business District

Summary of February 28th Forum on Proposed Zoning Amendments

The Planning Board held a public forum via Zoom on Tuesday, February 28, 2023 at 8pm. The purpose of the forum was to provide an overview of the proposed zoning amendments the Planning Board intends to bring forward at Annual Town Meeting on May 13, 2023.

The public forum drew around 80 participants. Following the presentation on the purpose of the new zoning, the Planning Board's goals and vision, and a description of changes to the dimensional standards and review process, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and comment on specific details of the bylaw.

Presentation Highlights

The proposed Lower Village Business District zoning amendments allow for Business District property owners to put forth creative site and building designs that achieve the Planning Board's vision of Lower Village as a vibrant village center. The bylaw includes flexible requirements related to the placement and size of buildings so that more focus is placed on architectural design and the layout of the site as a whole.

Put another way, the bylaw trades strict zoning requirements that have created the district as it looks today, with large swaths of parking and boxy buildings, for the Planning Board to have more authority over the look and feel of the district.

The intent is for the district to grow over the coming years and decades into the vision of a pedestrian-oriented traditional 'village center'.

A Vision for Traditional Village Design

Exemplified in 5 distinct ways:

- Walkability
- Strong Mix of Uses
- Housing Opportunities
- Accessible by car, bike, and by foot
- Distinct Sense of Place



The proposed zoning includes the following new allowed uses:

- Mobile food vendors and pop-up markets;
- Artisan production;
- Microbreweries, craft breweries, and brew pubs;
- Retail Centers (rather than individual retail uses);
- Mixed Use Development (one or more businesses in the same building as residential dwelling units)

Of note:

- Complete Streets features are encouraged at every site, so that Lower Village is accessible for pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicles, both to the district and within.
- All development requires at least 5% of the site to be set aside as open space for community gathering, outdoor dining, courtyards, and pop-up markets
- The Planning Board is provided authority to regulate development through the Special Permit and/or Site Plan Approval process in cases such as:
 - Changes in use that result in a greater number of parking spaces;
 - Development that includes a new entrance or alters traffic circulation on site;
 - Neighborhood Retail Centers;
 - Mixed Use Developments;
 - Razing an existing building and constructing a new building.

Public Input Highlights

Implementation/ Achieving the Vision. A number of participants expressed support of the Planning Board's vision and intent of the proposed bylaw, with questions on the process of implementing the bylaw once passed and the length of time to achieve the vision. All new development and redevelopment would be overseen through a Special Permit and Site Plan Approval process, meaning that the Planning Board would hold public hearings and condition approval of development to ensure compliance with the bylaw. The vision will take many years to achieve, as it depends on Business District property owners proposing modifications or development of their sites and regional market factors. Members of the Planning Board highlighted the [Business District Assessment and Market Analysis](#) completed in December 2018, which describes market conditions as well as feedback from residents and business and Business District property owners.

Public Water and Sewer Infrastructure. Some participants speculated on the inability for the vision to be achieved without water and sewer infrastructure and questioned whether the timing of the proposed bylaw is appropriate. The Planning Board maintained that it is in the Town's best interest to secure zoning amendments prior to any potential future installation of water and/or sewer infrastructure so that the Planning Board has Special Permit Granting Authority over any new development to align with the provisions of the proposed bylaw.

Landscaped Buffers to Residences. Some participants expressed concern that the proposed bylaw decreases the required landscaped buffer between the Business District and the Residential and/or Recreation-Conservation Districts. The current requirement for landscaped buffers is 50 feet (Zoning Bylaw Section 4.4 (1)). The proposed bylaw reduces the requirement to 30 feet (Section 3.3.5.17 of the Proposed Bylaw) in order to allow flexibility to those business parcels which abut Residential and/or Recreation-Conservation Districts but whose Business District boundaries are further from residential structures. An example of this includes 118 Great Road, as that parcel includes land within the Business and Residential Districts. In addition, the proposed bylaw includes a Special Permit and/or Site Plan Approval process for site redevelopment wherein the Planning Board may consider the specific buffer needs of the application in front of them. Some residents requested the bylaw to be amended to allow increased

protections to residences within the Business District. This item should be discussed further with the Planning Board.

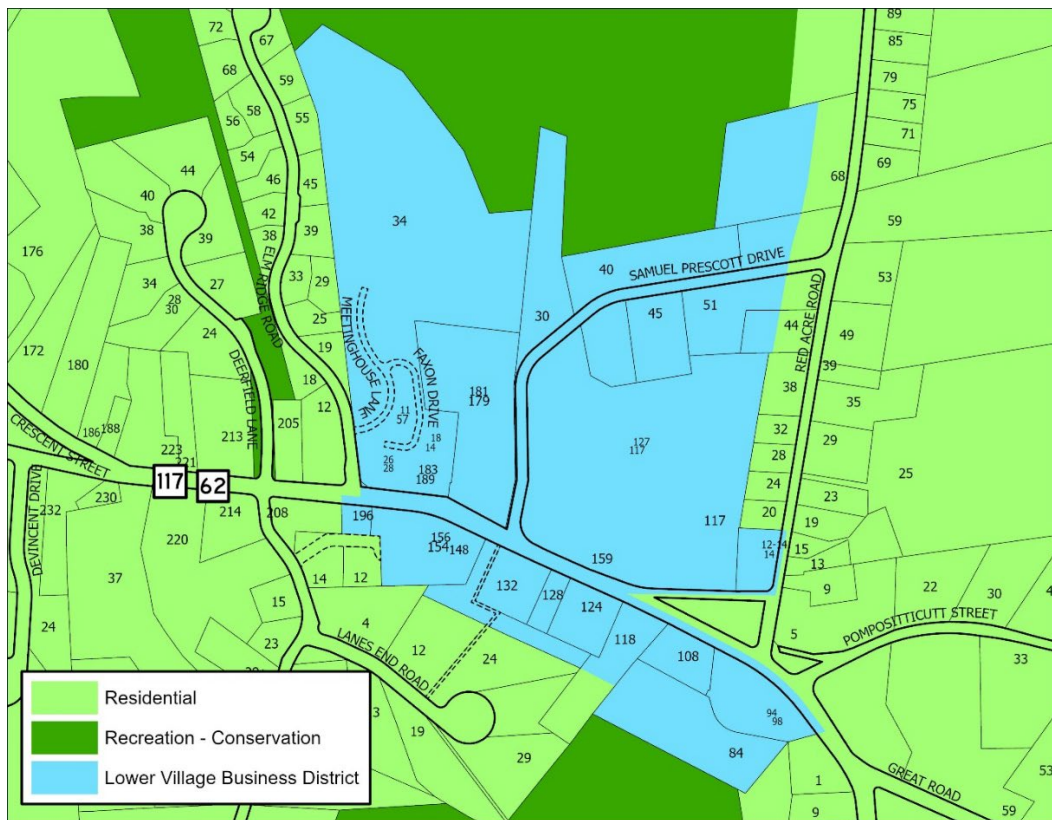
Special Permit Process. A few participants, including a Business District property owner, questioned whether the Special Permit process is too burdensome for Business District property owners and may hinder development. The Special Permit and Site Plan Approval process is the best way for the Planning Board to ensure that development meets the intent of the bylaw, though the Planning Board should review this feedback.

The Planning Board administers the Special Permit process within the timeframes allowed per State Law. While not shared during the public forum, an example of the timeline of the Special Permit process includes the following:

Example: Redevelopment of 108-118 Great Road:

- Applied for a Special Permit on August 30, 2019 for the demolition of the former Beef N'Ale restaurant and the construction of a larger building in its place, to be occupied by two Business District tenants. Issued Special Permit on March 26, 2020.
- Applied for a Special Permit modification on September 30, 2020. Issued Special Permit modification on November 17, 2020.
- Applied for a Special Permit reissuance on October 11, 2022 due to the permit's lapse. Issued Special Permit on December 13, 2022.

Boundary of the Proposed District. Residents asked for clarification of the location of parcels within the Business District. Currently, parcels within the Business District are located in three areas of Stow: Lower Village, around the intersection of Hudson Road and Great Road, and at the intersection of Harvest Drive and Great Road. The proposed bylaw creates a new district in Stow – the Lower Village Business District:



Mixed Use Development. The Planning Board received a range of comments related to the allowance of mixed-use development. The proposed bylaw allows developers the option of constructing buildings that mix business and residential uses by Special Permit. Residential development would be limited to 2 bedrooms per unit and an overall maximum density of 6 units per acre. Concerns heard include municipal impacts related to an increase in population, water and sewer infrastructure limitations, and inclusion of universal design. The Planning Board should review this item further.

A resident wondered whether the Lower Village Business District would be the future location of Stow's required [Section 3A \(MBTA Communities\)](#) multi-family housing district. The Planning Board will review MBTA Communities through a separate process, however as written the Lower Village Zoning Bylaw would not satisfy this requirement as the bylaw does not allow residential development without a business component.

Planning Board Actions if the Bylaw Passes. Feedback included the need for outreach to the business community in the instance of the proposed bylaw's success at Town Meeting. Additionally, the Planning Board would wish to create a Design Guidelines document to compliment the new zoning bylaw to further explain architectural and site design standards to prospective developers.