



Town of Stow  
**PLANNING BOARD**

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## **Lower Village Business District Zoning Changes**

Frequently Asked Questions

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### **1. What is the purpose of the proposed zoning bylaw?**

The proposed bylaw is intended to revitalize Stow's primary business area to become a walkable, vibrant village center. The Bylaw directs the long-term development of Lower Village and provides greater control to Stow residents and the Planning Board to influence the look and feel of Lower Village.

The Planning Board has reviewed how zoning impacts various struggles Lower Village faces, including a high vacancy rate, an uninspired mix of businesses, auto-dominated streetscapes, and a lack of a sense of place, meaning that it does not reflect the community in which it is located. With added flexibility for property owners to redevelop and a focus on design and aesthetics, the proposed bylaw allows the district to shift over time from its current state to that of a traditional village center. Village center design is exemplified by walkability, a strong mix of businesses, inclusion of housing opportunities, accessibility by multiple modes of transport, and a distinct sense of place. The proposed bylaw changes have been developed in recent years with assistance from consultants to ensure that the Town's vision of Lower Village is achieved.

### **2. Where is Lower Village? Is this Stow's only Business District?**

Lower Village is Stow's primary Business District, located along Great Road (Route 117) roughly between Elm Ridge Road and Red Acre Road. Additional Business District properties are located along Great Road at its intersection with Hudson Road and at its intersection with Harvest Drive. In the proposed Zoning Map below, a new district is created for the Lower Village Business District, as the proposed zoning bylaw will only govern uses in Lower Village.

- [Current Zoning Map](#)
- [Proposed Zoning Map](#)

### **3. If the bylaw passes, how will Lower Village change? What does this mean for existing buildings and businesses?**

We expect that it will take years before Lower Village physically changes, and all existing uses and buildings would be grandfathered in. The proposed bylaw influences development when it happens, but does not dictate that it must happen. Putting these bylaws in place gives property owners new options that they can choose to pursue, whether to take advantage of the newly

allowed uses within existing buildings, create additional buildings within their existing site layout, shift to a new site layout, or leave things as is.

Approving the proposed bylaw means that the next time a property owner chooses to make physical changes to their site, that development is subject to new design standards and requirements.

**4. Why is it important to adopt this bylaw now, when the Board expects it will take years for Lower Village to develop into the vision?**

The main reasons for adopting the bylaw at this Town Meeting are the following:

- Without the bylaw in place, the vision is not achievable.
- Without having the proposed bylaw in place, any new buildings or redevelopment may look similar to how Lower Village appears today.
- If and when public water becomes available to businesses within Lower Village, property owners will be incentivized to redevelop. It is important that Stow has control over any new physical changes in order to influence the architecture and design of those buildings.

**5. How does the bylaw benefit Stow residents?**

Over time, the new zoning benefits Stow residents by:

- Creating spaces for the community to gather: to bring your family, to meet your friends;
- Making the district more pedestrian friendly;
- Allowing property owners to do more with their sites, thereby providing residents with more options, more businesses to patronize;
- Including traffic mitigating options to conveniently guide vehicular traffic through Lower Village.

**6. What are the beneficial short-term changes associated with the bylaw?**

The biggest short-term benefit is that through the public hearing process, the Planning Board and Stow residents have greater control over the look and feel of any proposed new development.

The bylaw sets forth design standards allowing the Board influence over site elements, such as the design of buildings, parking lots, and landscaping. The bylaw includes new allowed uses, encouraging property owners to consider food trucks, pop-up markets, and craft breweries, all options to attract new tenants and activate outdoor spaces.

**7. Lower Village is not served by public water. Is the vision achievable?**

There are uses that are feasible without any change to availability of water. For example, 108 Great Road, the former Beef N' Ale restaurant, has an approved permit for a new building and has received interest from Dunkin Donuts as a tenant, while north side of Great Road does have access to a public water supply at the shopping plaza.

The lack of public water and sewer infrastructure is an obstacle for higher intensity uses, such as a larger capacity restaurant. Given that public input indicated the desire to have more restaurant options, the Planning Board agrees that water is a key part of revitalizing Lower Village and recognizes that it is in the Town's best interest to have adopted the proposed zoning bylaw before any future initiative to bring public water to Lower Village so that architectural design, landscaping, and building orientation all align with the Town's vision.

**8. Will the Town review traffic impacts in Lower Village in the future?**

Yes, as Lower Village grows into the vision of a village center, the Planning Board and Town staff will continue to monitor traffic and any mitigation needed. The Board reviews traffic impacts on a site-by-site basis through the public hearing process based on proposals put forth, and can have traffic studies and traffic engineering input as well. It is understood that as the district evolves, a more comprehensive view of the flow of traffic through Lower Village may be needed.

**9. How is the bylaw supportive of local businesses and business property owners?**

The proposed bylaw supports businesses and property owners in the following ways:

- Property owners may further develop their sites, increasing the number of tenant spaces;
- New allowed uses will offer property owners more options to attract tenants;
- Customers will be drawn in with opportunities for outdoor dining, pop-up markets, food trucks, craft breweries, and community gathering space;
- The addition of residential units in small scale mixed-use developments will add vibrancy to the district by increasing foot traffic and providing stability;
- Improved aesthetic appeal of the district will draw businesses and customers to Lower Village, as business owners indicated the aesthetic appeal of each site was factored into their decision of where to locate

**10. How does the bylaw support green infrastructure and climate resiliency?**

The proposed bylaw decreases parking requirements and encourages property owners to provide a robust landscaping plan and include items such as EV charging stations, solar or green roofs, pedestrian-only streets, and Low Impact Development techniques to better manage stormwater. The vision for Lower Village reflects a movement away from the car-centric district currently in existence and toward a pedestrian-oriented village center. The bylaw includes Complete Streets design components, ensuring the village is accessible to all modes of transportation. Design standards include opportunities for shared parking to reduce traffic and minimize impervious surfaces.

**11. Does the bylaw allow new housing in Lower Village? Why?**

Yes, the bylaw allows small scale mixed-use development as a secondary use, such as apartments above retail shops. The purpose of allowing mixed-use development is to provide for increased viability of business uses in the district by driving foot traffic to businesses, and to add housing opportunities in Stow. For example, this means that a building under single ownership may include both retail space and residential uses. Free-standing residential units are not allowed under the bylaw. The bylaw limits residential uses to two bedrooms per unit and requires that the majority of space in a building is devoted to business uses. Market research has show that a challenge in attracting desired retail businesses is the small population that Lower Village serves. Additional residents living nearby would provide increased market support for desired uses and add vitality to Lower Village.

**12. I have a concern about a specific property in Lower Village. How will my concerns be addressed?**

Just as is true today, site-specific concerns may be addressed through the public hearing process if the property owner seeks to make changes to the exterior of their site. Residents may speak with the Zoning Enforcement Officer and Planning Department for any concerns related to compliance with the Zoning Bylaws or a Special Permit.

**13. What is changing regarding lot size and setbacks?**

The proposed bylaw eliminates minimum dimensional requirements and business-to-business setbacks in favor of design standards to give property owners greater flexibility in developing their properties. Through decades of public outreach, the Planning Board has heard clearly from residents that the design of buildings and the design of each property is of utmost importance – the look and feel of the neighborhood. The bylaw encourages infill development between existing buildings and buildings to be located closer to the street, allowing an increase to retail space while encouraging interlot connections to relieve Rt 117 traffic flow.

At the same time, the bylaw continues to offer residentially zoned properties 50 ft buffer to mitigate visual and noise impacts, with some flexibility for the Planning Board to reduce to 30 ft should it be beneficial to the town and site layout allowed reasonable mitigation. This has also been extended to existing residences in the business district.

**14. Are there any comparable Village Centers that reflect components of the proposed bylaw?**

The Planning Board heard clearly that residents envision something like West Acton Village or Groton Center. Therefore, with guidance from planning and zoning experts, the bylaw was drafted to allow flexibility rather than strict dimensional standards so that Lower Village can aspire to a similar New England village design. Each property in Lower Village is rather unique, and it is clear that one size fits all zoning has not worked in Stow’s benefit when it comes to Lower Village.

**15. How much public outreach and engagement has the Planning Board conducted around these changes?**

This zoning bylaw reflects decades of planning effort with input from residents, business owners, property owners, and planning consultants through written surveys, visual preference surveys, studies, public forums, and two generations of Lower Village committees. The work of writing the zoning bylaw officially began with a public meeting of the Planning Board, Economic Development & Industrial Commission, and Lower Village Revitalization Subcommittee on August 25, 2020. The following is a sampling of the effort to reshape the Lower Village:

- [Lower Village Subcommittee Final Report\\*](#) (May 2011)
- Lower Village Forum (November 2012)
- Visual Preference Survey (2013)
- Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Threats Analyses: [2013](#) and [2018 update](#)
- [Traffic Safety Improvement Project and Public Forums \(2017- 2019\) \\*](#)
- [Lower Village Business District Assessment and Market Analysis](#) (December 2018)\*
- [Lower Village Revitalization Subcommittee Final Report](#) (May, 2019)
- Public Forums on Draft Zoning Bylaw\*: October 7, 2021, February 28, 2023, March 22, 2023, March 28, 2023
- [Webpage for Lower Village Zoning Updates](#)

*\* indicates outreach was conducted specifically with business property owners and business owners through mailings, surveys, forums, one-on-one discussions, and/or public meetings*

**16. Are the provisions of the bylaw feasible? Can Lower Village achieve the vision?**

Yes, the bylaw is feasible. Over the years, the Planning Board has worked with consultants that have real-world technical expertise in zoning to ensure that the language of the bylaw will achieve the vision of a traditional village center. In addition, the Board has worked with consultants with expertise in economic development to better understand the business conditions and market of Lower Village and how zoning impacts the various struggles Lower Village faces.

The bylaw is intended to achieve a unique business district that is right-sized for Stow. The purpose of the bylaw is to create a village center that speaks to the needs of Stow residents. Lower Village cannot compete with business centers such as Maynard Crossing or the Highland Commons, nor does the Planning Board wish to. As a result, the bylaw looks to encourage businesses like Nan's Market, as an example of the type of business Stow seeks and the architecture of the building.

**17. If the bylaw passes, what are the Planning Board's next steps to continue support of Lower Village?**

The logical first step would be for the Planning Board to review the existing Rules and Regulations regarding the permitting process, site plan approval, and subdivision of land. Besides Zoning Bylaws, these Rules and Regulations guide developers through the development and permitting processes and offer design standards on things such as streets, driveways, and sidewalks. As part of a typical zoning process, the Planning Board will review Special Permit Rules and Regulations to understand what additions may be needed given the new bylaws. In addition, the Board will look to develop Design Guidelines, a companion document which will provide greater detail regarding architectural and landscaping requirements, including green infrastructure. Staff will continue to assist residents, business owners, and business property owners in understanding the zoning changes made, including new allowances and restrictions.

**18. Why doesn't the Planning Board support drive-thru establishments in Lower Village?**

Under the current zoning and in the proposed bylaw, drive-thru food establishments are not allowed. It is common for drive-thrus to be prohibited in village centers, as many of our neighboring towns have done. The Citizen's Petition would allow drive-thrus throughout the Business District in Stow. This petition is not about one specific business coming into town, but rather the allowance of an unlimited number of drive-thrus. The Town is unable to restrict drive-thrus to one location. If drive thrus are allowed, there most certainly would be more than one application in Lower Village. Additionally, many new models, such as curbside pickup have emerges offering similar conveniences without taking up the physical space of a drive-thru. With numerous vacancies in Lower Village, this is a pivotal moment- Lower Village could become a vibrant, walkable village center. The Planning Board feels that drive-thrus create traffic conflicts, cause an unsafe environment for pedestrians and cyclists, and would take up valuable space that could otherwise be used as outdoor gathering spaces, which all run counter to the long-term vision for Lower Village.