

Comments to the Zoning Revisions Committee on King Street zoning concepts proposed by the Northampton Chamber of Commerce:

My name is Joel Russell. As you know, I was Chair of the ZRC until September 8, 2010. I am a professional zoning consultant who has drafted zoning codes and code revisions for over 30 years in all types of communities. These have included dozens of Highway Business zoning provisions that have been adopted. I regret that I cannot attend the ZRC's public meetings to present these thoughts in person. I write them as a private citizen with experience and expertise, one who has considered carefully the Chamber of Commerce's report and the ZRC's thought process.

The Chamber report on King Street zoning has much to recommend it. I would urge the ZRC to listen carefully to public comment and develop its own recommendations. To help frame the discussion, I would urge you to consider the following major points:

1. King Street is the northern gateway to our community. A gateway should properly introduce visitor and resident alike to Northampton and should embody who we are and what we value. We should feel proud of our community as we pass through it, as I think most of us do as we enter Northampton from Route 9 through Florence and the Smith College campus to visit our vibrant and successful downtown.
2. The "entranceway business" zone concept in the Chamber report is basically sound and will extend much of the positive character of downtown northward along King Street. It is worthy of serious consideration, with the following clarifications and modifications:
 - a. The front setback requirements should include a maximum setback small enough to enclose the street, perhaps no more than 10 feet from the sidewalk, with parking to the side or rear.
 - b. There should be building design standards, perhaps those used for the CBD architecture district, to increase the likelihood of quality design, administered through the Planning Board.
 - c. There should be a special permit provision to allow relief from requirements where they do not fit the particular characteristics of a parcel, consistent with the overall intent of the district, which should be clearly spelled out.
 - d. This zone should extend from Stop and Shop south to the CBD and consideration should also be given to using this zoning category between the Damon Road intersection and the area of the Blue Bonnet Diner because of the large concentration of residential population within walking distance.
3. The proposed changes to the Highway Business zone, with the exception of opening the zone to residential and mixed-use development, are more problematic and should be treated separately from the entranceway business zone proposal. If adopted as recommended by the Chamber report, the result could be much like the worst of Route 9 in Hadley, merely softened by a green

vegetated buffer. This part of the Chamber proposal needs further work, and a balanced and expert study committee should be formed, under the auspices of the Planning Board or City Council, to make recommendations on zoning for this area. As part of this study process, developers with experience retrofitting commercial strips with mixed-use development should be consulted for advice. Consideration should be given to the approach to highway business zoning that Greenfield has adopted, where a corridor overlay design district and a special permit requirement for developments over 40,000 square feet provide the community some control over major developments.

4. Zoning on northern King Street cannot be separated from the design of the street and streetscape. The Chamber report recognizes this. For this reason, the study group just referred to should look closely at future reconstruction of King Street and the adjoining sidewalk and landscape treatment. Most zoning changes for the HB district, other than those that would open up the district to residential and mixed-use development, should be deferred until there is a street redesign plan in place and a method of funding to implement it.
5. Zoning should not be adopted unless its implementation is economically feasible and fiscally sound. The Chamber has focused our attention on economic feasibility, which is a good thing. However, the issue of economic feasibility is based upon predictions of foreseeable market conditions, which are never easy and are particularly difficult in today's troubled real estate market. This makes them inevitably subjective to some degree. It is also well-established that dense mixed-use development of the kind found in our downtown provides far greater tax revenues per acre of land than single-use retail boxes surrounded by parking lots. The short-term desires of today's developers, while relevant and worthy of our careful consideration, should not override the long-term best interests of the community as a whole.

Thank you for considering these suggestions.

Joel Russell