

I would like to acknowledge the hard work of the Norwich Planning Commission to fulfill a need for some affordable housing in Norwich. I have not heard any one deny that their efforts have been sincere and that some affordable housing is desirable. However, I have just finished watching the video of the July 13 meeting, and I still have some concerns about the Commission's proposed plan.

What seems to be missing is any example of how such a town plan, which incorporates a "hamlet", has been implemented successfully in other towns of our size. Instead what we have seen is a proposed site plan for a particular location (Route 5 South) that was evidently chosen during a series of charrettes., involving a small group of less than 20 residents rather than open Town discussions or a survey such as the one done in 2005 which drew over 900 responses.

If we are not going to jump in to a rezoning program right after the plan is approved, why did the planners commission such a study?? And why was the focus on zoning while ignoring the expiring town plan? The plan calls not just for high density housing but commercial development as well. It was pointed out by Marcia Calloway at the meeting that if we allow this to become an additional town center (what else is a hamlet?) we may lose certain protections that Act 250 could provide against unsuitable commercial development. At the same time we may change the historic nature of the Town while distorting its center.

Charrettes were called several times to Union Village where in the year 2000 I had begun the restoration of a large corner lot (a sand and gravel operation under Act 250) on route 132. My preference was to maintain a rural neighborhood. That particular charrette location, across from Toni Prince's riding school, is now conserved farmland. Like the location on Route 5, it allows people arriving in Norwich to appreciate that this is after all, a rural village with one center. (When being pressured several times to go along with other use for my land, it was suggested that Union Village should become a village again and even have its own Post Office.)

I know from experience that it is very costly to remove land from Act 250. The idea that we would erode our town by allowing commercial permits free of Act 250 restrictions is alarming!

One speaker at the July13 meeting had not read the proposed town plan and encouraged others of us who are too busy to do the hard work of the Planning Commission to trust in the due diligence that that committee and select board are doing on our behalf. That was precisely what I had been doing until I awakened to the meaning of the charrettes and to the zoning change proposal which I believe is flawed. If this town plan is approved it would essentially open the door for a taking by eminent domain.

The town of Woodstock has affordable housing on a comfortable scale for a town of 3000-4000. Woodstock had funding to start their project because money had been raised to form the Woodstock Community Trust to thwart a more undesirable development, the

arrival of a Rite-Aid. I learned from hearing Kathleen Shepard of our Affordable Planning Committee that Norwich raised money as far back as 2000 for affordable housing. It should be a no-brainer to continue if we do it on an appropriate scale. There is little doubt that there are Norwich residents who would contribute to affordable housing, but there is no mention of this concept in the Town Plan.

The Woodstock trustees decided the best use of remaining funds was to purchase land for affordable housing. They undertook a rigorous 8-year process that entailed visiting many other towns both in and out of Vermont. The committee chose a model that allowed for up to 36 affordable housing units in an area which was already zoned mixed use, had sewage, and where the houses could be meshed with a much older preexisting neighborhood. The project is managed entirely by Twin Pines which in turn pays taxes to Woodstock. If Twin Pines might be helpful in fulfilling our long term goals, should they not be consulted and their ideas addressed in the Town Plan?

My friends who served on the Woodstock Trust were dismayed to hear that we were thinking of generating a development which would of necessity be so much larger than the actual number of affordable units, an estimated multiple of 4. The intent of such unnecessary construction would be to guarantee that implementation of a waste water system would not be too burdensome for a developer. It was noted that as soon as the owner of the Route 5 property became aware of the zoning proposal for her land she raised the price to \$1.5M, far more than the original asking price or assessed price of \$188,000. Call it what you will, “mega development” or cluster housing or “hamlet” it sounds as if there is a scale issue here. To put the project in the hands of a developer when critical infrastructure is lacking does not seem to be a responsible step for the town of Norwich to take.

I am hopeful it is not too late for the Planning Commission to examine other affordable housing models to see if it makes sense to scale our plan as Woodstock has. Then there would be the possibility of retaining control by selecting a professional management organization to maintain the development over time.

I am not in favor of the sort of town plan that has been proposed

1. because of the scale of development that is envisioned,
2. because it appears that the planning board has not evaluated all possible options (such as the program in Woodstock and some other towns close to our size)
3. because I believe it imposes a mixed use “hamlet” on a neighborhood which is currently rural residential and at the same time will have a negative impact on the experience of those entering this historic town, just as it would have had on 132 in Union Village.
4. Most unfortunate and impractical is that the plan would require a developer to overbuild to help cover the cost of the infrastructure that is sorely lacking today. If the town is not willing to accept the responsibility for owning and maintaining that infrastructure, it will put future development in private hands. I am certain our children and grandchildren are going to want a say in future town plans just as we feel empowered to today.

