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Town of Stafford
Board of Selectmen/Planning & Zoning/Economic Development
Special Joint Meeting
May 29, 2019
7:00 p.m. – Veterans' Meeting Room
Warren Memorial Town Hall

Members Present: Planning & Zoning Commission: Regular Members: Nancy Ravetto, Chair; Gene Julian; Kathy Bachiochi; Ron Houle; Cindy Rummel; and Alternate Members: David Palmberg, Leonard Clark, Michael Delano, and Chris Joseph.
Board of Selectmen: Mary Mitta, First Selectman; John Locke; Rick Hartenstein
Economic Development Commission: Richard Shuck, Chair; Sal Titus, Andrea Smith

Also Present: David Perkins, Zoning Enforcement Officer
Dr. Donald Poland, AICP
Public

Agenda:

1. Call to order
2. Presentation of Zoning Analysis and Market Research Report by Donald Poland.
3. Adjournment

1. Call to Order:

Nancy Ravetto, PZC Chair called the meeting to order at 7:04 p.m. She provided background information that led to contracting with Dr. Poland for the zoning analysis and market research report. She said PZC members were often asked by the public why Stafford cannot get another grocery store in town and so in the spring of 2018, she reached out to the Board of Selectmen and Economic Development Commission to form a combined meeting where the three groups could work collaboratively. The group last met in February.

Nancy Ravetto said she and Gene recently attended a municipal planning conference where they asked for references to try to promote Stafford. It was suggested they reach out to both the Capitol Region Council of Governments and the Capitol Region Education Council. Through those contacts, the suggestion was made to meet with Dr. Poland. She said the zoning information provided in Dr. Poland's report will help with the PZC's update of the Plan of Conservation and Development and the market analysis will be helpful for the Economic Development Commission. Copies of Dr. Poland's report were provided to the Board of Selectmen and EDC and have been posted on the Planning & Zoning Commission's Facebook page.

She introduced Dr. Poland and thanked him for preparing the report.

2. Presentation of Zoning Analysis and Market Research Report by Donald Poland.

Dr. Poland said he looked at grocery stores and other retail in the context of both zoning and marketing, noting he had looked at some of the Facebook discussions. He said it is not uncommon for residents to ask these kinds of questions.

In the context of zoning, Dr. Poland looked at both use and site development. He said currently a Special Use Permit (SUP) is required for retail developments over 20,000 square feet, which could be a barrier to a new grocery store, which typically would be over 20,000 square feet. However, the SUP does not appear to be the primary barrier. It is ultimately the lower traffic count. He noted also that he found nothing negative in the allowable parking in the regulations for retail uses. (Grocery stores, not being defined as a specific use, are permissible as a retail use.)

Dr. Poland said there are also limited sites for large grocery stores in the commercial corridors. He said retailers tend to look largely at income, the number of households, the number of vehicles going past a potential site, and the drive times. Statistically about 5,000 households are needed to support a grocery store. With 4,691 households in Stafford, the market is being served with one grocery store in town.

Dr. Poland reviewed Stafford's demographics---looking at household income, density, and household size. Stafford is a community that leans somewhat older with smaller household sizes and lower density per square mile. The majority of Stafford's employed people work outside the community, so its daytime workforce is lower.

Probably the most important factor considered by potential retailers is the traffic count. Dr. Poland said the threshold for most national retail chains is about 15,000 vehicles passing by the site per day. The Aldi's chain has a higher requirement at about 22,000 vehicles. Unfortunately, the highest traffic counts on Routes 32 and 190 are about 12,100---lower than the desired counts retailers look for. He noted that if Stafford had somewhat higher numbers (i.e. 15,000 to 18,000 vehicles per day), they might be able to engage an Aldi's if they also offered other enticements such as a speedy permitting process.

Dave Palmberg asked about the potential for a Trader Joes grocery store. Dr. Poland said he has not often seen a lot of ground up construction from Trader Joes, and often they locate in former Ames stores as their square footage is similar.

Rich Shuck said from the regional demographics he has seen, they tend to seek out communities with higher income levels.

Dave Palmberg said he was of the impression that Aldi's locates in lower income communities, but has found they more often locate in middle income communities, and that traffic counts play a big role.

Mary Mitta said she would expect that an Aldi's would stick with their higher traffic count requirements if there are other Aldi's stores in the area.

Nancy Ravetto asked if IGA stores are a chain. Dr. Poland said IGA's are independently owned grocery stores that band together for purchasing purposes like a franchise. For example, Geissler's Supermarket is an IGA, and so the Geissler family would ultimately decide if they wanted to locate in a store.

Fran Moriarty, a member of the Board of Finance, said the EDC had approached Geisslers as it is a store that tends to locate in smaller communities. They were originally offered the co-op location, but at the time they were working on their Somers store and so they did not want to do anything at that time. Nancy Ravetto noted they did up the cap on retail development from 40,000 to 60,000 square feet in recent years.

Gene Julian asked if there is something unique about Stafford that they can attract a Tractor Supply, but not a second grocery store.

Dr. Poland explained that when a person shops at Big Y, they typically swipe their store card to get discounts. From that card swipe, they gather a lot of data about consumer spending habits, which is used for marketing purposes. They also sell that information to market research groups like ESRI which uses segmentation tools to allow retailers to better understand consumers spending habits---breaking them down into different categories and matched to census data. The same is done with credit card purchases. In looking at that data, Dr. Poland found that nearly 100 percent of Stafford falls into three segments, with over 52 percent falling into the "Green Acres" segment. The Green Acres lifestyle features people who enjoy country living and self-reliance – the perfect demographic that Tractor Supply attracts. It is no small coincidence that Tractor Supply looked to locate in Stafford, as they probably purchased that marketing data. The other two segments that Stafford falls into include "Front Porch" (26.4 percent) and "Parks and Rec" (18.3 percent).

Chris Joseph asked if Dr. Poland had looked at the number of seasonal residents in town and if that might have an impact on counts. Dr. Poland said he didn't look too closely at it—that while some communities like Old Saybrook might have a significant seasonal population—Stafford's would not really reach a critical mass.

Dr. Poland reviewed the retail gap analysis, which looks at retail trade opportunities that are currently leaking out of the community. He found there is potential for Stafford to capture more retail trade, particularly with food and drink establishments, though larger clothing and general merchandise (big box) developments would be a challenge to attract due largely to low traffic counts. He recommended not pursuing another grocery store at this time, but focusing instead on community-scaled retail investment.

Dave Palmberg said another factor they need to consider is utilities---sewer vs. septic, and that a national restaurant would likely need to connect to the sewer line. He asked if it would make sense to look closer at hospitality type businesses near Stafford Speedway. Dr. Poland said if they were going to invest time and energy, he would recommend they focus on Main Street as it has a lot of energy around it. He noted the work the Garden Club does already to make the area vibrant and appealing. However, Main Street does have some constraints such as the age of the building stock and the narrowness of the road.

Nancy Ravetto asked what the PZC might do with zoning in order to encourage retail development. Dr. Poland recommended backing off on Special Permits, especially in the town center, as much as possible. He also recommended looking at parking in the context of on-site requirements or how it comes into play as a current use or change of use. He gave the example of a building that houses an insurance company that then becomes a bakery, recommending eliminating parking requirements for the change of use.

Dr. Poland also recommended offering tax abatements or other enticements that might make investment more appealing.

John Locke asked if the former Bakers Furniture building might be a viable spot for a restaurant. Nancy Ravetto noted that some people had expressed interest in turning it into apartments, and the PZC was willing to work with them, but the developer was hampered by financial issues. She suggested the combined groups might work together to help Mr. Rossi at Bakers Furniture with getting some new business established in the building.

Mary Mitta said the findings in the report did not surprise her too much as society is changing, and it is common for people to work out of town and do some of their shopping near where they work before coming home. She cautioned about not reacting too much to social media, as it could take them down a slippery slope. She said the Board of Selectmen, PZC and EDC started the combined meetings as a means to get the three groups collectively together, not specifically to address grocery stores alone, but to consider how they could all work together for the betterment of Stafford.

Nancy Ravetto said she was surprised by the report as she had always felt it was Stafford's median income that was the biggest barrier to development, rather than its' traffic counts.

Chris Joseph asked if it would be feasible to look into developing the upper portion of Main Street into businesses. It was noted that the area is made up mostly of privately owned homes, and the age and condition of the buildings could also present challenges.

Dave Perkins noted that the Department of Transportation is developing a plan for the business corridor, but it is only about 30 percent done. He said the state will be open to

recommendations from Stafford. Mary Mitta said she attended a meeting on it, but can't yet get a copy of it as it is far from complete.

Sal Titus asked if they should focus on trying to entice a sizeable anchor store to town. Dr. Poland noted that even with the Big Y anchor store, the others store outlets there are not full. Dave Palmberg noted that the 60,000 square foot cap is for the entire Big Y plaza, not just the Big Y store itself. Nancy Ravetto said the PZC is willing to work with developers if they need more than the cap and they can change the zoning regulations if it benefits the community.

Rich Shuck said it is not the PZC's duty to appease developers; rather they should have issues like cap sizes ironed out beforehand. Nancy Ravetto said they tend to use the SUP so they have room to work with a developer if regulations are hindering development. Rich Shuck expressed concerns that it would be problematic for the town if the PZC appeared to bend the regulations for one developer, but not for another.

Dave Palmberg said a square footage cap is the cap regardless of whether they are going through the SUP process. He said potential developers will look at their regulations and see the cap and if that doesn't work for them, they will not even bother to inquire.

Dr. Poland said he is not seeing many large developments as has occurred in the past, so it might not be an issue. However, if the 60,000 square foot cap is for an entire plaza, rather than just a single store in the plaza, that could be a potential barrier to development.

Mary Mitta questioned why the PZC should have a cap on building size at all. Dr. Poland said he is not a fan of minimum/maximum building sizes and feels parking tends to be overbuilt everywhere. He said it is common for SUP's to be required if a building is to be over a certain square footage, such as at 30,000, 50,000 or 60,000 square feet. He said absolute caps are a bit rarer, and are usually set because of a comfort level. It tends to be a community character issue. He suggested they look at language for square footage for cumulative buildings and for caps on size.

Nancy Ravetto said that several years ago, a cap on building size was placed at 40,000 square feet to prevent a big box store from coming to town. She said they may not need a cap anymore because big box stores are not building like they used to and they don't have the land available for a big box store.

Rich Shuck asked what kinds of retail businesses they might want to capture. He asked about entertainment venues—such as a bowling alley, a dinner theater, or a recreation facility similar to Sonny's Place in Somers. Dr. Poland suggested bringing existing business owners into the conversation as small businesses tend to be entrepreneurial and may have some ideas to share.

Nancy Ravetto asked about commercial industry. Dr. Poland said they should be putting 80 percent of their efforts into business retention and expansion. He said their greatest potential would be in growing existing businesses, helping them to expand. Nancy Ravetto said it might be good to invite members of the business community to a combined meeting.

Leonard Clark said the town has long been working with existing businesses, with not a lot of success, and, in fact, they have lost some businesses. He said he chairs a PZC subcommittee that is working on establishing a floating zone, and possibly a small business park. He said they need to get the word out that the town is open to business and to attracting the kinds of businesses that pay higher wages. Those jobs will then attract ancillary retail businesses. He discussed a past effort some years ago to develop a business park. It was a big gamble, but was voted down at referendum.

Dr. Poland said it is risky for governments to get involved in business development, and he recommended proceeding with caution. Fran Moriarty suggested investigating forming a group of local investors who might be willing to put up the money for a business park.

Dr. Poland said that in some ways, retail jobs are the unskilled factory jobs of the past. He said the landscape has changed, and it is hard to entice a 3M to come to town. Leonard Clark said the focus should be on attracting higher wage jobs and that it is part of the town's responsibility to try to increase the level of income for its residents. Dr. Poland suggested they try not to get too far into the weeds with wages.

Chris Joseph noted a statistic that said 20 to 25 percent of Stafford households had a disabled person and asked if this was typical, what types of disabilities were common, and if this might present an economic opportunity. There was consensus that the high number mostly reflected students with special education needs.

3. Adjournment.

Gene Julian made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Kathy Bachiochi. The Special Joint Meeting of the Planning & Zoning Commission, Board of Selectmen, and Economic Development Commission was adjourned at 8:47 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Annie Gentile
Recording Secretary