

Focus Committee Meeting, December 1, 2005

Present: Gil Carreiro, Janet Dolder, Bob Fichtel, Pat Frederick, Chris Gagnon, Christina Sargent, Sallie Thoma, with Eric Smith, Town Planner and invited guest, Tim Driskell of the Conservation Commission

The meeting began at 7:05 PM.

Chairman Bob Fichtel presented the topic of zoning in the Murray Road area to Mr. Driskell by comparing two maps, one showing wetland designation, the other, proposed zoning changes. Bob explained that we want to preserve Industrial zoning in this area because the Town has so little industrial zoned land, and will have still less if the Forest Legacy designation is applied to the Beals property on Route 12, currently zoned Light Industrial, which would restrict its development in perpetuity. The Murray Road area has always been zoned Industrial.

Janet pointed out that we are thinking of possible future needs of the town.

Tim Driskell stated that the water table in the Murray Road area is a result of rainwater leaching through the soil from the higher land nearby.

Bob and Chris had walked the property when the soil was dry, noting the presence of an ancient cellar hole and a large ditch, the latter understood to be the work of the late Granville Rideout.

Tim Driskell outlined some rules and possibilities concerning future use of the property: Up to 5,000 square feet of wetland may be filled, with no further consequences. Any larger area that is filled would need to be replicated on the property. Crossing the wet area with a road would be feasible, but cost could be an issue. Doing the work properly would probably be more practical for a large industrial entity with significant financial resources (such as in the adjoining Summit Industrial Park just over the Gardner town line) than for a residential developer, who might be limited to pursuing the most financially expedient course.

Tim Driskell also mentioned that the Conservation Commission had been approached by someone interested in putting a base on the property for a test wind generation tower, but that the project has not moved forward. Tim Driskell thought the Conservation Commission would look favorably on such land use.

Bob asked whether, as he had heard somewhere, removing trees and planting crops on wetland would help drain it. Tim Driskell responded that removing tree canopy makes land wetter, because trees take up water from the soil and give off moisture through their leaves. Chris said the land is wet during very limited times; fallen wood there seems to turn black and hard, not rot, and there is no sphagnum moss on most of the land.

Gil stated that the Murray Road property has the best nearby access to a major highway artery – Routes 140 and 2 – that the town can offer to attract Industry. The same access is also a major attraction for the residential developer wishing to sell to commuters. He felt that if we want to preserve the land for future Industrial use, we should not zone it Residential.

Tim Driskell recommended we get a survey of the wet area, so the town will know what it is offering potential Industry. Looking at a map of Summit Industrial Park, the Committee considered consulting Summit's engineering firm about the Murray Road area.

The Planning Board is placing an article on the Town Warrant, for Residential rezoning of the land on the East and West sides of Murray Road totaling about 90% of the industrial land.

Sallie Thoma's preference would be to maintain Industrial zoning of the whole area East and West of Murray Road, Janet agreed it seems best to leave the zoning as-is, all Industrial.

Chris stated that the people living along Murray Road would probably vote to change the zoning to Residential. Sallie asked, rhetorically, if these people understand how much more vehicular traffic on Murray Road would be generated by the construction of fifteen more houses, especially since most homes involve two or more vehicles.

Bob proposed recommending a vehicular weight limit for both Murray Road and South High Street. Eric Smith felt that such limits are usually ignored.

The present Industrial zoning of the area dates back to the 1960s, in light of more railroad activity at that time. If there is a future sharp decline in petroleum availability, railroad transport could regain importance, and a spur could be reactivated in the area under consideration - another reason to maintain Industrial zoning.

Chris made a motion that the Focus Committee support maintaining Industrial/LIA zoning in the Southwest corner of Ashburnham as it now exists. The motion was seconded by Sallie Thoma, and passed unanimously. Christina Sargent recused herself from voting, to avoid any appearance of conflict of interests, in case at some future date she is involved in a real estate transaction in the area.

Next Subject Under Consideration: Highway Department relocation.

At the recent Selectmen's meeting, Town Administrator Kevin Paicos expressed doubt about the depth of soil tests at the present Highway Department property. Is a Phase II test needed, probing deeper into the soil? ES&M did the testing, and has all the data on file. Bob has contacted ES&M asking if further testing is necessary, and requesting a written response.

Christina reminded the Committee that we had talked about the Town's retaining ownership of the property, granting any developer a 99 year lease, or some such agreement. This is certainly a serious option.

Bob said the Town needs a feasibility/planning study to identify an appropriate new location for the Department. He reiterated the need to find a location as near as possible to the "hub" of the town, outlying areas being accessible by roads radiating like spokes therefrom. Two bids for a study have been received by the town; from SEA, for \$20,000 and from Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) for \$10,000.

The land area required for relocation is about five acres.

Gil suggested that if it is too costly to move heavy equipment for snow removal from the Transfer Station location we had considered, to the other end of the town, perhaps such equipment could be stationed at the Municipal Light Department when snow is predicted, and extra fuel for it stored there as well, to eliminate long trips on Route 12.

Methods of storing salt/sand were discussed, including either an enclosed building like Westminster's, or a roofed but open-sided concrete bin such as is seen in Brookline, NH. Timothy Driskell pointed out that for all the concern about preventing salt from leaching

into the soil at storage depots, after a long winter, that salt has washed from our roads into the nearest wetlands and watersheds.

Christina moved that the Committee submit an article for inclusion on the Town Warrant, requesting a feasibility study to identify a new location for the Highway Department. Janet seconded the motion, which carried unanimously.

The Committee looked at an aerial photo with superimposed property lines, showing the Caouette Parcel in South Ashburnham, as a possible location for affordable housing for persons 55 and older, if such reuse of the Highway Department property proves not to be feasible. Following the November meeting, members of the Committee had changed the date for walking the property from November 30th to December 7th, rain date Dec. 9th, at 9:00AM.

The Committee read the Minutes of the November meeting, and after two minor corrections had been made, Chris moved to accept the Minutes as corrected. The motion was seconded by Christina, and approved unanimously.

An open informational hearing on plans for the projected Public Safety Building will be held December 7th. (Time and location??)

The Planning Board will hold a public hearing on the zoning of the Murray Road area at their next meeting, December 8th at 8:30 PM. We should attend.

The next Focus Committee meeting was scheduled for January 19th at 7:00.

Sallie moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:00 PM. Christina seconded the motion, which was passed by unanimous vote.

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia H. Frederick