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Forums Aim To Ease Public Angst About New Zoning

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Published on 10/31/2005

Stonington — Over the past two years, Director of Planning Jason Vincent has helped the town implement some innovative new zoning districts to develop vacant mill sites for mixed use and create a museum zone for Mystic Seaport that gives neighbors more input into future museum development.

Both proposals were supported by residents. The Industrial Heritage Reuse District has resulted in three mill projects being either approved or proposed in the past year.

But then came the Neighborhood Development District, which is partly in response to a proposal by a development group to build town-house condominiums in vacant parking lots along Prospect Street that were once part of the former Harris Graphics complex. The district is designed to allow innovative mixed-use development of underused commercial properties while giving neighbors and the Planning and Zoning Commission greater control over the plan than with typical zoning.

This so-called floating zone, which could be applied to any area in town regardless of current zoning, was met with opposition at a public hearing. Residents were especially angry when the Planning and Zoning Commission did not let them comment on new information presented at a public hearing and then proceeded to approve the proposal. One opponent filed a lawsuit and the commission has now decided to hold a new hearing on Nov. 16 and then hold a new vote on the proposal.

The controversy persuaded Vincent that something had to be done to better educate and inform residents about this and other upcoming proposals before they reached a public hearing.

He came up with an idea for the planning department to hold periodic forums to discuss planning topics with residents. Experts will be brought in to explain the subject and moderate the discussion. Vincent and his staff will be on hand to hear what residents have to say.

"These are complex concepts. There's a real need to educate people participating in land-use decisions, not just the commission but the residents as well," he said.

So last week Vincent brought in Glenn Chalder of the firm Planimetrics, which helped the town develop its Plan of Conservation and Development, to lead the first forum on floating zones.

After Chalder gave a clear and concise explanation of the different types of zoning, the forum turned into a freewheeling affair in which some residents criticized the flexibility and few restrictions of the floating zone and said they had little confidence it would work because of their distrust of the commission.

"The NDD is like a cloud over our heads. We have no idea where its going and what's in it. That's the problem we have with it," resident Ed Hart said.

Vincent said the forum was what he envisioned when he came up with the idea. "The discussion went right to the core of the issue. It's a new concept and the public doesn't fully understand it, so we have to help them understand why we're proposing it," he said.

Vincent said he would apprise the commission of the resident's comments that they don't necessarily oppose floating zones but they want tighter controls on their requirements.

"Our challenge is to build trust. We have to do that over time through outreach and inclusiveness. It won't happen overnight," he said.

The effort continues Dec. 15 with another forum on a topic to be determined. Possible subjects for future forums include sprawl, traffic calming, accessory apartments and open space protection. ■

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