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Master Plan Update Committee

Zoning for homes and jobs is important

By Roger Godwin
Master Plan Update Committee

At the public hearing on the master plan update, the question came up of the changing demographics of northern New England, the statement being made that the area is starting to experience a net outflow of residents.

It only makes sense to think about a master planning process in the context of what is projected to be happening in our own town over the next couple of decades, as well as in our area. We haven't done much of that yet, and if we suppose that it may take as long to make necessary changes in whatever we do with our laws now as it has taken to date - a third of a century since zoning was adopted in 1974 - then we'd better get it right while we're at it.

For at least 20 years we've been worried about development pressure and putting the brakes on any development beyond what state law thinks of as Andover's "fair share." But in recent years our school enrollment has *not* been exploding as we'd feared, and there has been at least one year, maybe more, in which the building permit applications haven't amounted to the number of permits allowed by our zoning ordinance.

Statisticians are watching what's happening statewide and their population projections are on the New Hampshire state Web site below, well worth a close look: NH.gov/oepp/programs/DataCenter/Population/PopulationProjections.htm.

These projections do not foresee the population falling. They do, however, predict a much lower growth rate, under seven-tenths of one percent per year between now and the year 2030. They also predict a substantial change in the makeup of our population, with both school-age residents and people of ages 20 through 55 (most of our working citizens) being ever-diminishing proportions and retirees hugely increasing their percentage of the population.

The run-up in housing costs over recent years has not been as bad for New Hampshire as for Massachusetts, which is seeing an exodus of young workers and families. It is, however, not that different from what we saw in the late 1980s. Even with the current slowdown and diminishing price levels, the cost of housing is still beyond the financial ability of many young families - and these are the people who are our future. If, through our zoning and other limitations, we make it too expensive for them to live here, and too hard to create jobs, who is going to do the future's work?

On the flip side, that of the retirees, we've worried a lot about how real estate tax increases affect those on fixed incomes. Merrimack County's present ratio of retirees is 12% of the total population, and there's no reason to think that Andover differs much from that. The 2030 estimate is that those people will constitute 29% of the population, an increase of almost two and a half times.

These aspects of the future have serious implications for what we should be looking to achieve with any zoning changes. Ours is a town whose advantages of location and nine grades of school are attractive to young families. But we must make less expensive housing possible, or they can't afford to live here. We should make it easier for businesses to locate here, to make jobs for those young folks. And for our retirees, a range of possibilities from group homes to "over 55" condo developments can make housing less painfully costly and moderate the impact of tax increases.

We need to be thinking these questions out before we write the statutorily required parts of the master plan update, and we need to hear as much from Andover's residents as they will volunteer.

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