

Hamilton Development Corporation
Hamilton Wenham Village Visioning Workshop
Saturday, January 10th
2 to 4 PM
Hamilton-Wenham Public Library

Meeting Minutes

In Attendance: David Carey, Bill Gisness, Rick Mitchell, Brian Stein (Chair)

Welcome

Brian Stein welcomed audience members. He briefly described the previous two visioning workshops, which covered zoning, uses, building heights and density; and introduced the topic of this meeting: design guidelines.

Bill Gisness introduced and offered background on the members of the Hamilton Development Corporation's (HDC's) board: He is an architect that lives adjacent to the business district; Stein is an architect that lives in the business district; David Carey is a former Selectmen; and Rick Mitchell is a member of the Planning Board.

Presentation

Gisness reviewed the goals for the workshop (see PP). In early 2014, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) completed another workshop in Hamilton to gather input for a Village Vision and Action Plan, which is online and includes some potential design guidelines for businesses.

Gisness shared a zoning map of the downtown (from the MAPC plan). He described the current design of the downtown. One side of Railroad Ave. is dense with the buildings close together, no setbacks and minimal parking. The other side has more parking near businesses, including the post office. Willow St. is mostly single-family residential buildings with setbacks. On Bay Rd., near the Black Cow it is dense with no separation between buildings, but on the other side of the railroad tracks it becomes more residential in appearance. The goal for the workshop is to begin to describe in those and other terms what we want each of those roads to look like.

Building Design

Gisness read MAPC's recommendations for building design. MAPC suggests that buildings in the business district should not exceed the average height of the current structures and that small-scale architectural and other character-enhancing features should reduce the apparent bulk of the buildings. Gisness shared images of buildings in Hamilton, and asked the audience for their thoughts.

Carey asked Gisness about the length of the sidewalks and if they would be included in the setback. Gisness replied that the sidewalks are approximately 10ft in length on Bay Road, but would ideally be closer to 15ft; and the sidewalks could potentially be included in the setback.

A member of the audience asked if one of the questions was whether or not we want Willow St. to be residential in appearance and character. A conversation ensued about if residences and abutting businesses would abide by the business district zoning bylaws or the design guidelines. Stein replied that if a property is a single family home, then it abides by R1 residential zoning guidelines, rather than business district guidelines (and has a setback).

A member of the audience (Bill?) raised the concern that we may be over-regulating. Without guidelines, the village has been populated by businesses with a variety of styles that fit together. Are we setting strict rules? And not encouraging economic development? Gisness replied that these are not laws, but preferences. Stein replied that one developer has actually said that they prefer to have design guidelines because they can more quickly and easily plan and gain approval for their projects. Also, we are not necessarily trying to establish one look for the district, but there are probably looks that we wouldn't like.

Jen Scuteri commented that she would like to see a smooth transition between residential and business districts, so that it is obvious which is which, but there is not a huge difference in styles, and perhaps there is a building in between the residential and business districts that has characteristics of both. A member of the audience asked if a business that abuts a residential property could be up to 28ft high with no setback. Scuteri agreed that this would feel abrupt. Gisness emphasized that the MAPC guidelines also support a transition between residences and businesses.

The same audience member (Bill?) again expressed concern that we are over-regulating a district that currently looks good. Mitchell replied that when the HDC began the rezoning process, abutters and residents were concerned about what mixed-use and multi-family properties would look like in the village; and so the guidelines allow us to express what we would like to see and allow us to influence, but not control, the design of new buildings. For example, nobody likes that Cumberland Farms is building a new facility that is larger and different, but Cumberland came to the Planning Board, asked for design guidelines, looked at the guidelines that MAPC created, and began to incorporate them into their project. The Planning Board and the ZBA helped to further refine the designs through a public process and hearings, where people expressed what they did and didn't like. Developers want to see design guidelines because they want to know what the town finds acceptable so that they can avoid difficulties in the public process. Our goal is not to regulate, but to facilitate development. We are not trying to be Nantucket.

The same audience member (Bill?) asked if the guidelines are enforceable. Mitchell replied that they are guidelines and not absolute requirements, but builders know that they have to go through a regulatory process with the Planning Board and ZBA and members of the public to determine what is appropriate.

Another audience member (Bob?) returned to the issue of businesses that abut residences and recommended that they be very different than other businesses which would have no setback and that they consider currently existing trees. Carey summarized this as a request for a “residential buffer”.

Gisness shared photos of Hamilton businesses that have very different looks, but are on the same block, and asked if audience members prefer a mixture of styles.

An audience member (Barbara?) sought to clarify whether the height limits would be 25ft or 28ft. Carey said that the height of a building is the midway point between the gutter and the peak of a building with a pitched roof. Gisness said that at a previous workshop they had discussed 25ft, but the HDC thought 28ft would be better because it would result in fewer existing nonconforming buildings. The audience member (Barbara?) said that it would be easy enough to grandfather those buildings in. And she said that she would prefer 25ft so that the buildings are two-story and not three. Other audience members agreed that they would prefer to limit buildings to two stories.

Another audience member asked if the guidelines could be enforceable by being linked to special permits. Mitchell replied that they couldn't. The same audience member expressed her preference for buildings that do not have parking lots in front; her preference for lighting, landscaping and windows; and her dislike of blank walls and internally-illuminated signs like the Sunoco's. Another audience member (Barbara) agreed that the guidelines should promote dark skies.

Building Roofs

Gisness described three possible types of building roofs as flat, gabled, and long roofs with dormers, and asked for the audience's preferences.

One audience member stated that she disliked flat roofs, but some flat roof buildings do have interesting facades that suit the current aesthetic. She prefers gabled, which is more traditional, but she doesn't want to over-regulate. She believes that with minimal guidelines we can ensure some cohesiveness. Gisness replied that this was the same as MAPC's recommendations.

Another audience member asked which roofs would best promote the use of solar technologies. Gisness replied that that was outside the purview of the guidelines.

Another audience member (Bill?) mentioned a property that has a flat roof with a false façade.

Carey engaged the audience in summarizing their preferences. They prefer gabled or pitched, with dormers; and they don't prefer flat roofs.

There was also a comment from a member of the audience (Bill?) that it would be helpful to include surrounding buildings in engineering plans so as to ensure cohesiveness.

Storefronts

Gisness described MAPC's recommendations for storefronts, which is to have them directly on the pedestrian sidewalk, rather than blank facades. There are nice examples on Railroad Ave. The Talbots and Community Package Store on Bay Rd. would better adhere to the guidelines if they faced the road, rather than the parking lots. An audience member replied that those stores maximized the space, which makes sense from a business perspective. Gisness added that they are, in fact, facing a pedestrian walkway into the large shopping center.

A discussion began on the inappropriateness of glass facades for some businesses, such as doctors' offices. Gisness showed images of buildings that have significant glass or visibility on the first floor for retail shops, and much less on the second for other types of businesses. Also, the dentist and attorney offices on Railroad Ave. have a different look than the retail shops. One audience member commented that for doctors' offices and other similar businesses, it'd be better that they have something attractive, rather than windows with closed blinds, on the pedestrian level. Another audience member (Barbara) made the point that there are two constituencies, the business owner and the building owner, and they have different priorities. Another audience member made the point that we can't regulate what people put in their windows. Pharmacies and supermarkets often cover their windows with signs.

Building Materials, Colors and Awnings

Gisness shared photos of buildings with different materials and colors, including brick and white siding, and asked the audience for their preferences. Carey polled the audience, which supported the New England clapboard look, but not necessarily just white – other colors as well. One audience member said "historical colors" and another liked the colors of Cutler's buildings.

One audience member expressed his support for the use of brick. Scuteri asked how the look of the dentist's building could be avoided in architectural terms, and Stein replied with a few suggestions.

Audience members agreed that they like awnings as long as they don't have much writing or phone numbers like the House of Pizza building.

One audience member asked if the design guidelines could eventually become bylaws. Gisness said that they could. The audience member continued to say that perhaps they could prevent something ugly from being built (like a Chili's or McDonald's). Another audience member (Barbara) suggested that acceptable guidelines could become bylaws. Mitchell responded that the HDC would like to create a special overlay district for the downtown (like the Willow St. district), in which developers would request a special permit, and regulatory authorities could deny the permit without justification, giving them authority to judge the proposal's appropriateness. Currently, site plan review allows the town to strongly recommend changes to projects, through a carrot and stick method, but ultimately the regulatory bodies cannot say no based on design.

Lighting, Sidewalks, Crosswalks, Bike Lanes

Gisness described current streetscape assets, such as trees with plantings, the pedestrian walkway with benches, landscaped properties, planters, crosswalks, stone walls, and signage. MAPC recommends creating more sidewalks and extending the period lighting up Railroad Ave. to increase the visibility of that part of the business district. MAPC also recommends creating bike lanes on Bay Rd. from Wenham to the pond, up Linden, and up Railroad. And they have crosswalk recommendations.

The audience supported increasing and improving crosswalks (except for one person who was not in favor). HDC members will work with town police to create recommendations.

Gisness shared MAPC's proposal for decreasing the size of the car lanes and adding bike lanes and more sidewalks on Bay Rd. A discussion ensued about whether or not to decrease the size of the car lanes – would it create more traffic problems, or would it result in the benefit of traffic slowing down in the village center and around the Winthrop School; would it be difficult for large vehicles; would it reduce the amount of available parking; would it conflict with state guidelines. To the last, Gisness responded that MAPC suggested that state guidelines may be more flexible for a town's business district. Carey polled the audience and many people were in favor of reducing the size of the car lanes (two people were not in favor).

Gisness shared MAPC's proposal for changes to Railroad Ave. Carey polled the audience and most people did not want diagonal parking. Audience members commented that there is not enough space, and it is dangerous.

Gisness shared options for street lighting that include a lamp on a pole or a gooseneck-style light with a lamp that overhangs. An audience member (Barbara?) asked for suggestions for lamps that allow for dark skies. Carey replied that Sylvania has a model that they installed on the Washington Mall that does that and is very efficient.

Carey polled the audience, which prefers period lighting to the current lights. One audience member was concerned that the period lighting would contrast with the different styles of the buildings. Another audience member replied that it's important to set the tone for the district in part through the lighting. Gisness clarified that the businesses and building owners would not be responsible for installing the lighting. It would be a project of the towns of Hamilton and Wenham funded by the meal tax.

Carey polled the audience for their preferences on crosswalk style. They dislike signs (or pylons?) in the middle of the road; they like sidewalks that protrude into the street so that cars can see pedestrians; they dislike islands in the middle of the street.

Carey polled the audience on their desire to see trees as part of the streetscape. Everyone affirmed that they like trees. One audience member (Bob?) said that we should preserve the trees that we have and create some guidelines for shrubbery to ensure that new trees are fairly mature when planted. Scuteri recommended that the plantings be sustainable – adapted to survive in our climate with minimal upkeep. Another audience member (Barbara) suggested that we look at evergreens in addition to deciduous trees because they remain green through the winter.

Carey polled the audience on their preferred styles for signage. Audience members prefer painted wood signs that are lighted externally. One audience member (Barbara?) commented that down-lighting would be better to promote dark skies. Audience members confirmed their dislike of internally-illuminated signs with big and colorful logos. There was some discussion between Scuteri and Mitchell of the ZBA's current guidelines on signage, which are complicated and need to be reviewed, but do not include design suggestions.

Gisness closed the meeting by inviting audience members to participate in the conversation as the HDC reviews the workshop discussion and begins to create the guidelines. The HDC meets bi-weekly at 7:30am at Town Hall. The next meeting is on Wednesday, January 21st. Gisness also shared the next item on the HDC's plan which is to do a cost-benefit analysis of further development in Hamilton using the Urban Land Institute's guidelines.

One audience member (Barbara?) requested confirmation that the design guidelines would be discussed alongside the recommendation to allow mixed-use development in the business district at the fall Special Town Meeting. Gisness confirmed.

Another audience member (Bob?) asked what the HDC will do to help existing businesses. Gisness replied with two examples of what the HDC has done so far.

From David Carey's Meeting Notes:

Setbacks

- Don't over-regulate
- Create a residential to commercial transition
- Have a residential buffer
- Blank wall effect

Heights

- Use 25' guideline

Parking

- Off-street parking

Lighting/Signage

- Dark Skies
- Consistent with small downtown

Building Size/Massing

- Require scale model representations

Roofs

- Flat? – No
- Dormers? – Yes
- Gables? – Yes
- Pitch? – Steep

Walls

- Blank? – No
- Windows toward street
- Full windows

Windows

- Depends on use
- Windows at ground level
- Constant question of interest

Materials and Colors

- White clapboard
- Brick
- Awnings (with less writing)
- Limited colors
- Non-vibrant colors

Street Lighting, Bike Paths, and Crosswalks

- More Crosswalks
- Parking issue
- Bike lane on Railroad Ave.? – No
- Diagonal parking on Railroad Ave.? – No

- Period lighting? – Yes (dark skies)
- Uniform lighting
- Brick crosswalks

Trees

- Shade trees
- Sustainable plantings

Signage

- Not internally lit
- Down-lighting (dark skies)

Respectfully submitted by Rachel Meketon, Coordinator

ATTEST: _____
Brian Stein, President