

# Downtown parking, Narragansett Avenue zoning changes concern residents

By Sam Bari

Planning Commission Chairman Gary Girard began his Nov. 5 meeting focused on the issue of downtown parking. The panel then forged ahead to complete a draft of recommended zoning ordinance amendments for the Town Council later this month.

Girard said that the subject of parking in and around the commercial district was difficult because it gave reasons for concern for both residents and merchants. He read a letter from Clinton Avenue resident Magdalena Andres that summed up the fears and reservations of many village residents, particularly those with property on the fringes of the commercial district, in the transition areas.

Andres said she was worried because commercial district property owners were advocating more relaxed parking regulations without considering the impact on neighboring residential districts. She feared that residential needs were being overlooked.

She cited the eastern part of Narragansett Avenue and the adjacent ends of side streets Green, Clinton, Howland, Grinnell, and Coronado as an ongoing problem that could only get worse if the parking regulations were relaxed.

"They have entirely different characteristics," Andres said. "A one-size-fits-all zoning change, particularly with regard to parking requirements will surely result in an intensification of business use." She is worried that residents adjacent to the commercial district will shoulder the burden of parking.

Additionally, Andres listed lack of sidewalks, no easy access to public parking lots, and side streets too narrow for parking on both sides as reasons for wanting stricter parking regulations.

"Residential streets are not parking lots for businesses," Andres said, adding, "this re-zoning seems to be going down the road of giving them a free lunch, served up at the expense of the residents."

Donald Powers, the consultant hired by the town to design the Downtown Vision Plan, was on hand to answer questions from the commissioners and those who attended the meeting. Powers addressed the parking issue by giving an explanation of the recommended changes in the Town Planner's report.

"You should not use parking to control development," Powers said. "That is not the solution." He said that Town Planner Lisa Bryer's recommendation in her plan-

ner's report for off-street parking was an intelligent approach that will work now and in the future.

Bryer said, "We are handling the parking by making regulations that address parking on an individual basis," she said.

The plan presented in her report said that businesses like hotels, motels and bed and breakfasts would be required to provide one space per room. Multi-family dwellings required 1.5 spaces per unit, while industrial and manufacturing facilities would require one space per two employees or one space per 270 square feet of GFA (gross footage area), whichever is greater.

"This might not improve the public parking problem, but it won't make it worse," Bryer said. "It won't allow for an increase in density without providing parking facilities to accommodate the increase."

The commissioners voted 5 to 1 to recommend to the Town Council the zoning amendments suggested by Bryer in the Town Planner's Report.

The commissioners took advantage of Powers' presence and asked questions on topics of concern.

Commissioner Michael Swistak

asked Powers for his opinion on the planning authority regulating building materials to be used in future construction.

Powers said, "We consider our recommendations to be guidelines that we encourage people to follow. They were not really intended to be enforced. I like to offer materials that are more acceptable than vinyl siding, etc. If I had a vote, I would ban vinyl siding. I think the negatives outweigh the positives. I think I would regulate it on Narragansett Avenue. By the time you redeem vinyl, it is no longer cost effective."

Swistak then asked Powers how he felt about the commission voting to not use the T-4 designation for businesses to create a transition zone between the commercial and residential areas.

Powers said that he was disappointed. He thought that the people attending the charrette were quite clear in their intent, and he did not feel that eliminating the T-4 district served their purposes. "I don't think it's a disaster, but it sure would have been nice if we could have put that in place," Powers said.

The commissioners also discussed the recommendations for sidewalks, buffer zones, and the

best zoning considerations for the Four Corners area at Narragansett and Southwest Avenues.

Chairman Girard said, "I think we accomplished a lot. The important thing is to draft these suggested zoning amendments into a recommendation document to the town council. Then they will be published and the public will have plenty of time to make changes if that's what they want. But we have to give them some guidelines."

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