

Opening Remarks 1-2-14

This has been quite a journey. We started this review six months ago and may finish this evening.

I do not recall any action brought before the Planning Board in my past twelve years that has been this involved, has had this many legal considerations and generated this much passionate discourse on both sides of the issue. These many meetings have stretched us as a community and as a board to evaluate possible uses of properties that had not previously been considered.

At this point after listening to all the presentations, reading the letters and emails and doing my own research in the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance, I understand the reasons why some want to support these proposals and why others oppose them. There are sound arguments on both sides.

None of the interpretation or evaluation of the reasons for or against the proposal are completely clear. Most can be challenged. It would be so easy if we could just turn to a page in the ordinance or the Comprehensive Plan and have specific direction on this issue but that is not the case.

As I reread the letters and reviewed the minutes, then searched through the Comp Plan and Zoning Ordinance, I found that some of the reasons or arguments made on behalf of or in objection to the requested changes were supported by the Town documents and some not. There were even some views of the proposed changes that were both supported and opposed by the Comp Plan.

The Comprehensive Plan is intended to be a document that explains the Town's current condition, and tries to forecast how the Town should or may look in 10 to 15 years and attempts to identify what changes in the world, in the region and local area may impact Camden's development. Methods of protecting the 'good' parts of the Town are identified and ways of changing the parts of town that need improvement are suggested. The 2005 Plan

attempted to do all those tasks, but it was unable to forecast how much older Camden had become, it was unable to forecast Camden losing 9% of its population between 2000 and 2010 and it was unable to forecast the financial crises of 2008 that had an adverse impact on Camden's ability to attract wealthy retirees from away.

The concept of the Comprehensive Plan acknowledges that it will not always be able to accurately forecast the future. That is one of the reasons why the Plan tends to be non-specific in its description of appropriate land uses. Specificity is added in the Zoning Ordinance.

So how do we consider the various viewpoints and come to understand whether or not these proposed changes are supported or not by our existing town documents and our own common sense? How do we begin to make the decision about moving this request on to the Select Board or rejecting it? I was drawn back to a suggestion made by a letter writer that “when evaluating the concerns expressed, each should be looked at in light of the best available” information. This opinion was also offered by an attorney in his closing remarks that the Planning Board members 'must determine which, of all the issues and statements they have heard, are of the most value in reaching their conclusions.'

This line of thought suggests to me that if there is not absolute clarity as to whether these proposed changes are supported or not by the Town's documents, then is there a preponderance of support on one side or the other?

The issues we should consider include the following:

Are these proposed changes similar to other uses in the town?

Is there any way we can see into the future to learn about potential unintended consequences if ordinances are changed?

Should we, as citizens of this Town, make the preservation of the Town's character and preservation of the quality of life we hold so dear a guiding principle in land planning and zoning issues?

How often can we push back against an employer interested in expanding or establishing a new business in town before no other employers show an interest in being here. The town pushed back against MBNA, Wayfarer Marine, Dunkin Donuts and Reny's. Will these anti-business attitudes allow Camden to prosper or will they accelerate the economic end to our town?

Is it possible to maintain our quality of life and still be an attractive town for businesses?

Should we resist change just because we are afraid of the consequences or should we resist change because we can definitely show that the change is inappropriate or harmful for us?

Is it reasonable to allow these proposals to go to Town ballot to achieve the greatest possible measurement of the support or lack thereof for the proposals rather than having the decision made by a few people on the Planning Board or the Select Board?

There have been many observations made by participants that question the practicality of using this particular property for the proposed facility. Many of those considerations do not apply at this time. They may be relevant later, should the project get to the Site Plan Review stage but for now they are not relevant to our decision.

Participants have questioned the business model and profit motives of the applicant. Others have raised questions about traffic counts and the availability of water and septic. Those issues are not relevant at this time.

Other participants have pointed out the greater good provided by helping people with alcoholism regain control of their lives. I doubt that anyone can argue with helping people improve their lives and learn to deal with their personal health issues but those considerations are also not germane at this time.

At times it seems as if all the non-relevant information that has been

discussed about this proposal has made the decision making very complicated, but I think it is really a fairly simple decision.

What we need to do is determine if these proposed changes to the Zoning Ordinance are supported or not supported by the Comprehensive Plan and the Zoning Ordinance of the Town of Camden. What will be the impact on the neighbors, on the neighborhood and on the Town if this proposal is implemented? The Maine Municipal Association Manual for Local Planning Boards directs that “the Board should not base its decision on the amount of public opposition or support displayed for the project. Nor should its decision be based on the members' general opinion that the project would be 'good' or 'bad' for the community. Its decision must be based solely on whether the applicant has met his or her burden of proof.

So let us begin that discussion.

Lowrie Sargent