

Village study has a mission

Locating financial institutions, preserving retail options, addressing concerns about the lack of parking and retaining a strong tax base are examples of the issues being tackled by the Villages Committee, whose mission for each center — Concord Center, Thoreau/Depot and West Concord — is to protect the unique character, enhance the quality of life, and enhance both the economic and housing opportunities available (Go to www.concordvillage.org). This article, the first in a series of four, examines the purpose and goals of the village study in anticipation of the final report by The Cecil Group expected in October, while the three articles that will follow in the coming weeks explore the progress on each of the centers.

Were you frustrated or surprised by the sudden changes that developed in Concord Center and West Concord this summer? If so, you are not alone. The Villages Committee believes that a key goal is to empower residents in guiding the future development of the centers. Proactive planning is essential to positively influence change. Concord residents have seen that change will happen as demonstrated by the bank proposal to replace two retail businesses on Walden Street and the devastating fire that wiped out Dee Bus, Dino's Pizza and a nail salon on Main Street. Anticipating potential changes

and encouraging desirable uses will affect other long-term community attributes such as economic stability and diversity of goods and services. It will also provide direction to town government regarding public investment in the town's infrastructure (such as lighting, parking improvements, pedestrian enhancements, traffic safety and wastewater planning). The Villages Committee wants to make sure that as change happens, it is of the kind and degree of change that is supported and desired by the community.

The centers will change; the question is how should the centers look in the future? Will the centers be as economically robust in five years, will there be more quality restaurants in 10 years and will there be mixed-use development with shopping, offices and housing in 15 years? Over the past seven months, the Villages Committee and its consultant, The Cecil Group, has conducted public meetings, distributed questionnaires, interviewed business and property owners and conducted two interactive workshops to solicit input from residents, focusing on what needs to be preserved and what ideally should change in each center.

Keeping the centers economically sustainable is the underlying mission of the village study. To prevent the town's tax base from eroding, it is essen-

tial that Concord's centers maintain their economic vitality. This study is exploring ways to expand business opportunities such as increasing the allowed height of buildings, which may give property owners an incentive to add a second or third story to their building, allowing outdoor cafes, encouraging new entertainment uses that will provide for expanded evening use of the centers, and encouraging more mixed-use development (i.e. retail, office and housing) to energize the centers. The study also reflects the key tenets of the state's Smart Growth Sustainable Development Principles: concentrate development; make use of existing infrastructure; increase job and business opportunities near existing development (See http://www.mass.gov/envir/smart_growth_toolkit/pages/Intro-to-SG.html). By creatively planning for sustainable growth, the Village Committee aims to maintain and improve the local economy and the quality of life in and around the centers.

To achieve these goals, the Village Committee is meeting in subcommittees to review three design alternatives, ideas and proposals generated for each center that have been developed through the public input process by The Cecil Group (download it at www.concordvillages.org). In the coming weeks, the subcommittees will be providing feedback to

The Cecil Group regarding minor changes that are quickly and easily implemented such as improved pedestrian walkways; more substantive projects that could take another year or more such as promoting local business (such as restaurant tours); and general ideas that may require further research such as appropriately proportioning mixed-uses like retail and housing in future development.

After receiving feedback from the subcommittees, The Cecil Group will provide a final report in October that will assess the committees' recommendations. Then a discussion on the recommendations on the final report will be held for each of the centers to give the residents another opportunity to share their comments. The end result is to ensure that the community has a complete understanding of every aspect of the planning options and can make fully informed decisions, if and when, the time comes to make planning choices.

Next week, the second article in this series will focus on "Concord Center: Preserving, Refining or Enhancing." The article will preview the feedback from the public input, discuss the reasoning behind The Cecil's Group's planning options and highlight the work of the Concord Center Task Force as its members prepare to make their recommendations.