

In Old Lyme, vision for Halls Road one step closer to reality

Published June 30. 2021 3:31PM | Updated June 30. 2021 7:39PM

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Old Lyme — A master plan to turn the 1960s-era strip mall sprawl on Halls Road into a livable, walkable town center was recently released as a guide for future public and private development.

Halls Road, a section of Route 1 lined with businesses, a post office, restaurants and views of the Lieutenant River, functions as a connector between Lyme Street and Route 156, where Interstate 95 on and off ramps also are located.

Halls Road Improvements Committee Chairwoman Edie Twining described the master plan as a way to ensure that development of the area serves the town and its residents.

The plan is separated into two distinct areas: public improvements, such as sidewalks and a pedestrian bridge over the river, and private investments that the committee hopes will soon be made possible by the creation of a new village district. With the new district would come zoning changes to promote a "small town" feel in keeping with the historic charm of Lyme Street, according to Twining.

Twining said many current zoning regulations affecting Halls Road were established in the 1950s and '60s at a time when shopping centers with big parking lots were all the rage. She noted her own father, who was a volunteer on numerous town committees back then, became involved with Halls Road development to make sure it "looked OK."

"I can't say he was that successful," she said.

Now, Twining is looking to resurrect a trend that was evident on Lyme Street before the mid-century focus on cars and consumption.

"People lived there and worked there and shopped there. Everything went on in that one place," she said of the street that now features schools, the library and town hall, but little in the way of retail offerings.

Schematics in the Halls Road master plan reveal a mixed-use philosophy that encourages attractive storefronts, cafes and outdoor dining while promoting new residential offerings to provide a built-in clientele for businesses. Those living quarters might be established above or behind the stores amid sidewalks and road improvements that make the area safer for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Twining said existing zoning regulations favor commercial projects from developers looking to capitalize on the proximity to I-95. The phenomenon was evident earlier this year when a Big Y gas station and convenience store was proposed on the Route 156 end of Halls Road, eliciting a public outcry from residents opposed to traffic, environmental impacts and bad aesthetics associated with what was routinely described as a "truck stop."

The issue became moot when the property was purchased instead by local investment management professional David Kelsey, who is also a member of the Halls Road Improvements Committee.

"I kind of solved the problem," he recently told The Day. "I just bought the property and it's not going to be a gas station."

Waiting on zone changes

Kelsey said he has some preliminary ideas about how to use the property, but added he is "sitting on it right now" as he waits to see if the changes to zoning regulations being promoted in the master plan come to fruition.

Under commercial zoning laws in place, property owners along Halls Road must set buildings at least 60 feet back from the road and must provide a certain number of parking spaces for individual businesses, as well as abide by certain building heights and other requirements.

"If there are setbacks that are reduced and I can build closer to the road, it'd be nicer for aesthetics and lots of other reasons," Kelsey said. "I don't want to use the current zoning regs if they're going to change."

He said he's considering commercial possibilities for the 1.3-acre property, citing real estate experience that tells him the site doesn't really make sense for apartments.

"It's not residential, but who knows. That could change," he said.

Regarding his status as a member on the Halls Road committee and a property owner there, Kelsey said he's no stranger to the area or to service on local boards and commissions.

Kelsey's business, Hamilton Point Investments, sits on Huntley Road behind the Halls Road property he recently purchased.

"If it's an evident conflict of interest, I'll recuse myself from votes," he said.

Twining said she had heard some "rumblings" about the potential conflict of interest, but didn't know if "that's an issue or not." Describing Kelsey as experienced enough to know when there might be conflict, she said it would be more of an issue if was on the zoning subcommittee, which he is not.

Affordable housing a sensitive topic

Cluster housing, townhouses, and second-story apartments also are referenced in the master plan as a zoning priority to help ease the shortage of smaller-scale housing options in town.

Twining pointed to the town's Plan of Conservation and Development, which must be updated by state law at least every 10 years to be eligible for state funding, which in its most recent incarnation, approved this year, cited housing options as a key area of concern.

The development plan said officials should consider multi-family, mixed-use and accessory apartments to meet the needs of various age groups, and called for a process that is open to regulatory changes that incentivize affordable housing.

Still, Twining shied away from using the term affordable housing in the context of the Halls Road Improvements Committee's vision for the area.

"I'm not really convinced that's going to be a robust part of this project. It's really up to the developer; it's not up to us," she said.

An affordable housing project by HOPE Partnership and the Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development, approved by the Zoning Commission in 2018, was appealed in court by residents. The dispute led the organization to drop any plans for the development due to lack of funds and continued, vocal opposition to the project. The project called for a 37-unit development to be built on land along the I-95 north Exit 70 off ramp and Route 156.

"There's some very sensitive stuff in town about affordable housing, and that's not even necessarily what we're recommending," Twining said. "There might be a percentage of affordable housing, but it would be more likely market rate housing so the developer who invests in Halls Road can make the profit they need to justify doing a big project here."

Twining has been the chairwoman of the committee since the beginning of last year, following the resignation of former Chairman Bennet "BJ" Bernblum in late 2019 because his vision [no longer aligned](#) with the reconstituted Board of Selectmen.

Bernblum's decision came just two weeks after First Selectman Tim Griswold ousted Democrat Bonnie Reemsnyder in that November's election. Griswold, who is a Republican, sits on a Republican-led Board of Selectmen with his running mate Chris Kerr and Democrat Mary Jo Nosal.

Griswold's campaign emphasized the need to preserve the community's "small town" feel and said significant redevelopment on Halls Road could threaten that ambiance.

Griswold this week told The Day he thinks the master plan for Halls Road "is pretty neat."

He said he is optimistic the state Department of Transportation will be open to changes within its right of way, such as the installation of sidewalks and crosswalks. He also thought such a project might qualify for the kind of funding that supports the Sound View sidewalk project.

Construction costs for the [Sound View sidewalks](#) are covered by a \$400,000 state Community Connectivity Grant. The town is responsible for paying for its engineering and design work.

Griswold was less optimistic about convincing private developers to implement the kind of changes recommended in the master plan.

"I think it's going to be a challenge, but with the help of the consulting group and so forth, they probably have some ideas as to how to entice some of the private landowners to move forward," he said.

Griswold said implementing the public improvements first will "set the stage" for private investment going forward.

Patience and progress

Twining reiterated the importance of the document as a long-term plan.

"This is only just a look at what you could do," she said. "Because we may only do the sidewalks and wait another 10 years before anybody builds anything."

The \$48,000 plan, funded by the town, was devised by the Glastonbury-based BSC Group, the engineering firm that is also working with the town on the ongoing Sound View sidewalk project.

The next phase of the plan to be completed by the BSC Group involves specific zoning language recommendations and funding sources, according to Twining. She said she expects the report this summer.

The Halls Road Improvement Committee was formed in 2015. Twining, trained in the fine arts and interior design, described herself as impatient with the slow pace of this type of municipal project. But she said she reminds herself that obtaining the master plan was an important step.

Now, the zoning changes are paramount.

"If nothing happens for 10 years, at least whatever does happen won't be what we have today. It'll be something nicer," she said.

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As the reporter for East Lyme, Old Lyme and Lyme, I cover the routine and the extraordinary aspects of small-town Connecticut life with the same level of care and attention to detail. This commitment is guided by the belief that the local level is where an informed citizenry can have the biggest impact. I enjoy telling the stories that make this area unique and asking the questions you need answered.