

Halls Road improvements sent 'back to the drawing board'

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Old Lyme — A zoning proposal to create a Halls Road Village District, more than six years in the making, was abruptly withdrawn by First Selectman Tim Griswold the day of a planned public hearing.

The application, with language based on a \$48,000 [master plan](#) commissioned by the Halls Road Improvements Committee, would rezone the roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile span between Lyme Street and Route 156 to encourage a mix of retail, office and residential options in buildings situated closer to the road.

Griswold alerted the Zoning Commission in a Monday letter that "the proper sequence of process was not followed" in bringing the application to the Zoning Commission. He said he originally signed off on the application because he thought it had been approved by both the Halls Road Improvements Committee and the Planning Commission.

Griswold signed the application on Aug. 31, according to the Land Use Department.

The public hearing was opened at last month's zoning meeting with a presentation by the Halls Road Improvements Committee and was set to continue Monday with more input from the committee, project engineer, staff members and residents.

"I believe the withdrawal of the application at this time will allow a more thorough review to take place before the application is resubmitted," Griswold wrote.

On Tuesday, he said he based his decision on concerns brought to his attention by two members of the improvements committee, including Halls Road property owner and current Board of Finance Chairman David Kelsey. Those concerns revolved around the lack of an official vote from the Halls Road committee endorsing the application, according to Griswold.

Kelsey on Tuesday said he's been vocal about his objections to what he described as a rushed, "opaque" process and to the proposed regulations. He argued rules in the new district would be too restrictive, making for a drawn-out and expensive process for anyone who wants approval to operate a business on Halls Road.

"I think we really need to take a deep breath and go through a process where there's a lot of buy-in, and I don't think that's happened yet," he said.

Proponents of the proposed zoning change, like Halls Road Improvements Committee Chairwoman Edie Twining, say the idea is to turn the outdated and unattractive strip mall sprawl into a livable, walkable and bikeable neighborhood through zoning changes that will make any future development blend more seamlessly with the historical and cultural charm of Lyme Street.

Twining said Tuesday that the decision to withdraw the application the day of the public hearing was "poorly handled." She argued the public forum is the best place to raise concerns about the document and to talk about revisions — "not in some private backroom situation."

"By pulling it, they've turned it into something that can be done quietly to their own needs," she said.

Twining said there is no procedure requiring a vote of the eight-member committee, though she would have called for one if anyone had asked. But she said no comments about the projected timeline or draft regulations were received prior to the opening of the public hearing in October.

"Because there were no comments, we assumed everyone was OK with it," she said. "Maybe that was a bad choice to do that. I am not a veteran person in the city planning system. I'm just a lay person who has been helping move this thing along."

Land use coordinator Dan Bourret said he first heard about the withdrawal when Griswold handed him the letter on Monday. He said he has not received any inquiries about the proposed regulation changes from anyone except the news media.

The application was being reviewed by the Planning Commission at the same time it made its way through zoning, but he said that also stopped with the withdrawal.

Proposed regulations questioned

Among the proposed village district regulations are a requirement that 80% of first-floor space facing Halls Road must be devoted to commercial uses and be no more than 15 feet from the road. It also establishes design guidelines and a review process to make sure any new construction or renovation projects look more like Lyme Street, according to the application.

Kelsey said that means "if somebody's property burned down, they'd have to rebuild it based on very, very strict zoning regulations" that might not be economically viable for some businesses.

A revision submitted to the Land Use Department on Oct. 29 addressed some of Kelsey's concerns, including removing dance halls, hotels and motels from the list of allowable uses and taking out restrictions that would have limited the size of bakeries and artisanal food shops to 2,500 square feet.

According to Kelsey, the small revisions don't change the fact that "everything is 'shall' and not 'may'" in the proposed regulations: "So it doesn't provide any flexibility. It's all very restrictive."

"I think the zoning regulations as proposed need to go back to the drawing board," he said.

Twining emphasized the zoning language is based on a master plan separated into two distinct areas: public improvements, such as sidewalks and a pedestrian bridge over the river, and private investments that would need to be made by businesses opening up or expanding within the proposed village district.

She said those realms are inextricably entwined when it comes to realizing the vision set forth in the master plan, which seeks to provide small-scale housing options like apartments and townhouses, promote local businesses and protect the road from becoming "a service plaza" for Interstate 95.

Griswold told The Day [back in 2019](#) he felt the Halls Road Improvements Committee's vision was too "grandiose." He said he instead preferred to install sidewalks along the road in segments before considering such broad plans.

More recently, he has expressed optimism about the prospect for state funding of sidewalks and crosswalks but has remained less optimistic about convincing developers to implement the proposed zoning changes. Finishing the public improvements first will "set the stage" for private investment going forward, according to the first selectman.

Twining acknowledged Griswold is the one who signed the village district zoning application in the first place and "he had every right to pull it."

But she said she's not sure why.

"I don't know whether this is an effort to get rid of changing zoning," she said. "There's a group of people who just want to make sidewalks to nowhere so you can look at parking lots. We're trying to do a little deeper dive than that."

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[COMMENTS](#)

Barbara Johnston

3 days ago

[Report](#)

I'm in favor of smaller parking lots allowing for closer parking access for handicap. Flexibility of store sizes.

No large stores.

A 'small town' appearance in new development style. Mixed use above. Possible living space above.

Bennett Bernblum

3 days ago

[Report](#)

The Halls Road Improvements Committee was formed by the Board of Selectmen as an advisory committee to the BOS. It can make recommendations to the BOS but has no independent authority. It was the job of the BOS when it received the recommended zoning changes to consider them fully and to decide whether or not to petition the Zoning Commission. It surely could have taken into account the manner by which the Committee adopted the proposed regulations, but the First Selectman did not discuss them with the BOS and he surely cannot blame the Committee for any failure to follow procedures. This is not to discount any questions or concerns property owners may legitimately express concerning the proposed regulations, including Mr. Kelsey. I note that similar concerns have been expressed by the CT Examiner, an on-line publication formed and funded by him.

Evan Andriopoulos

3 days ago

[Report](#)

A lot of the plans should show walk and bike ways, easy access by foot and bike to attractions, shops etc. Move shops and housing closer to curb side and not as is now with massive parking lots of buildings set far back. I would also add historical design/architecture is critical.