

Chairman of Old Lyme redevelopment group steps down

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By **Mary Biekert**

Old Lyme — The chairman of the Halls Road Improvements Committee, the group tasked with envisioning redevelopment along the town's main commercial thoroughfare, announced his resignation Monday.

Bennett "BJ" Bernblum, who has chaired the committee since its formation four years ago, submitted his resignation letter to the Board of Selectmen Monday. He told The Day Monday that he does not desire to chair a committee whose vision no longer aligns with the Board of Selectmen.

"Given the difference in our vision, and the right of the Board of Selectmen to have their own committee members moving in their own direction, they should be given the opportunity to do that," Bernblum said. "It's particularly important that the leader of the committee have views of the committee's mission that are aligned with the views of the Board of Selectmen."

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

Since announcing his candidacy in August, Griswold has emphasized the need to preserve the community's "small town" feel, and that significant redevelopment on Halls Road could threaten that ambiance.

Griswold said he felt the Halls Road Improvements Committee's vision was too "grandiose," as it called for concepts such as village-like storefronts and apartments, more greenspace and sidewalks. The road, which now acts a throughway for traffic traveling east to west adjacent to Interstate 95, currently features stores, such as Big Y, and shopping complexes set back far from the road with large parking lots in between.

Griswold had said he instead preferred to install sidewalks along the road in segments before considering such broad plans.

Griswold said he also prefers to keep decisions about the town's future within town control, noting his skepticism of the assistance the committee has

received from the Yale Urban Design workshop and the Connecticut Economic Resource Center.

After announcing Bernblum's resignation at Monday night's Board of Selectmen meeting, Griswold said, "We thank (Bernblum) for his service," and that he planned to go to the committee's next meeting to "catch up" with them.

Formed as an advisory committee to the Board of Selectmen in 2015, the Halls Road Committee can have up to nine members but now has seven without Bernblum.

Reemsnyder, who also sat as an ex-officio member on the committee, took a leading role with Bernblum in attempting to create a master plan that would re-envision Halls Road as a bustling and more livable town center.

Both Bernblum and Reemsnyder had said such changes would help small businesses remain in town and thrive; entice people to shop and dine here, while also attracting more residents; all of which would further stabilize the tax base.

Under Bernblum's leadership, the Halls Road committee secured more than \$10,000 in town funding in recent years, allowing them to work with the Yale Urban Design to help envision potential redevelopment on the road.

In May, the Zoning Commission also agreed it would be open to working with the committee to establish a village district for the road, which Bernblum and Reemsnyder theorized could promote needed private development in the area.

Bernblum said Monday he hoped the Board of Selectmen would listen to and consider findings from the town's recent economic development study, conducted by the Connecticut Economic Resource Center.

Bernblum said he believes there is broad enough support for new development on Halls Road despite comments from Griswold during his campaign.

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