

HALLS ROAD Improvements COMMITTEE

January 2021 Update

BSC Group has completed Phase 1 of the Halls Road Plan. This phase studied existing conditions of the Halls Road District in terms of Base Mapping, Public Way, Utilities & Infrastructure, Architecture, Signage, Landscaping, Market Conditions, and Zoning.

Some key findings are as follows:

CT DOT is open to reviewing new local connectivity projects. This means that rather than just considering vehicular traffic needs and safety they now recognize the need for multi-modal development that also includes such things as sidewalks, bike paths, pedestrian lighting, cross walks, etc.

Septic system options will be among the most important concerns going forward. Solutions in this area will be a key parameter in any future development of residential or mixed use in the district. Researching options will be an ongoing process beyond Phase 1 of the Halls Road Plan.

The architecture along Halls Road is typical of mid-twentieth-century strip center development. It does not reflect the look and feel of Old Lyme, as found (for example) in the mix of public and private architectural styles along Lyme Street. Existing signage along Halls Road is ineffective and somewhat outdated for retailers. No real landscaping has been provided along the road beyond grassy setbacks and some volunteer trees. There are no sidewalks, and the only crosswalks are at the extreme ends of Halls Road.

The Market Conditions study shows current market rates for general office & retail do not support new construction. Vacancies are at 5% but are expected to grow to 20% in 2021 as lease renewals come due. Changes due to the pandemic have added additional stress to retailers already competing with online sales. One positive effect from the pandemic is an across-the-board growth in demand for housing along the shoreline. The demand for diverse residential options has continued to go unanswered in Old Lyme. The small stock that does exist here is even more sought after today. In neighboring East Lyme and Old Saybrook as well, new apartments are quickly filled at rents that support new construction.

The current C30-S commercial zoning on Halls Road essentially imposes a strip center design in a commercial-only setting. It does not allow for mixed use or clustered residential development. A new zoning overlay district would have to be created in order to allow private investors to develop a different mix of uses along Halls Road. The BSC Group will provide sample text of zoning regulations that would permit these new uses. The new Sound View Village District is a small-scale example of mixed use zoning that includes consideration of multiple factors in making development decisions.

What this means to the Halls Road Improvements Committee and the town at large:

- Halls Road is Old Lyme's central commercial area and is the key component in the commercial health of the town.
- Changes in retail and office space utilization are imminent due to the pandemic and an already stressed "bricks & mortar" retail environment.
- The only opportunities likely to attract new investment in our central commercial area are those involving residential and mixed use.
- There is a solid demand for diverse housing options in Old Lyme, some of which could be located along Halls Road.
- The retail setting most likely to prosper in the coming decades is some variation on the traditional 'town center:' one in which housing, retail, work spaces, and public spaces are located together in a pedestrian-friendly and mutually supporting way.
- Walkability within a mixed-use village setting is what Old Lyme always had along Lyme Street, until the 1960s. We can have something like that on Halls Road in the coming decades, if we plan for it now.

As the BSC Group moves on to Phase 2, we will see a plan take shape that offers solutions and recommendations to improve the existing conditions detailed in Phase 1. The object is to keep Halls Road a vibrant commercial center for Old Lyme, and to better integrate it into the look and feel of our small town center.