

Public Forum on Growth and Density Thursday, November 15, 2018

The forum opened at 7:00 pm with welcoming remarks from Caleb Hemphill, Town Council Chair.

Craig Freshley, of Good Group Decisions, facilitated the forum.

Attendees were asked to submit their ideas and concerns in brief on pieces of paper. These papers were given to Mr. Freshley, who organized them into themes and posted them to the wall for all to review.

Common themes submitted included: rural character and open space, neighborhood character, pedestrian friendly, density, traffic, affordable housing, property values, schools, and infrastructure.

Mr. Freshley began by focusing on density. He asked why the town should increase density at all. One residents said the town needs smaller lots that are affordable; the town needs young families to move in and to make room for the children of current residents. Support was voiced for density where people can walk to services like stores and services. Growth outside that area increases the town's carbon footprint. Density of development in specific areas would preserve open space in other areas.

Mr. Freshley asked for concerns about density. One resident said dense development was not incentivized until the comprehensive plan in 2013. People who like to live in dense housing are different than those who like rural character, which features diverse houses and no homeowners' associations. Dense development would save land but impact the culture. He felt the culture was more important. Changes should be made to benefit the people who already live here. Another resident said the town has been built out in the last 50 years. He didn't want to see Falmouth developed to look like Connecticut or New Jersey, which would substantially change the character. The next resident that spoke was opposed to real estate people and developers jamming properties into small lots that would only benefit them and the property seller, and not residents. Mr. Freshley asked this resident if those smaller lots would benefit affordability and the people who might not be able to afford to live here. The gentleman felt the smaller lots would still not be affordable. One resident said it wasn't the towns responsibility to provide what people want.

Mr. Freshly observed that the comments indicated that the attendees wanted to preserve what they have.

One attendee argued that you can have rural development as well as density. Rural character is made by preserving farms and farmland, not big subdivisions with a few houses and large lots. He pointed out that veterans, people with middle income, etc. might not be able to live in this town, even though residents benefit from their services. He felt you can keep the character of the town while also allowing those who make the residents life easier to live here as well.

A resident said the houses that have been built since these changes were made were appalling; they were too tight. He felt these changes would affect peoples' quality of life. At Mr. Freshley's request, he clarified that having houses that close to each other impacts residents' privacy.

In response to an earlier comment about lower income people living in town, a resident pointed out that lower cost options are not that far away. Buyers can look in Buxton. He built a home here after living in South Portland and earned his place in this town.

A resident of Falmouth Woods subdivision spoke about a development that was approved to use their private road.

One resident said affordable housing would have unintended consequences. There are modest houses in town, and he felt the people who originally bought them probably couldn't afford them today due to the values going up. Affordable housing would cheapen the values of housing in town already. He was also concerned that a huge influx at the school would require an increase in the tax rate, pricing people out of their homes.

A resident shared her concern that she will not be able to age in place due to tax increases.

One resident was concerned with the decision-making process around the changes that were made to the density.

Another resident wondered what the optimal population of Falmouth was. He would like to see an impact statement on the consequence of the change in density, of what the schools and infrastructure can handle.

A resident spoke about the process with the CDC; the agendas are vague, there are no up to date minutes, and there is no public input at the meetings. He felt that town staff are too accessible to developers; the process is too far down the path before the public hears anything.

A resident said the town took three years to develop the changes. He lives near Oceanview and said that development destroyed his neighborhood; he wondered where all these people were then. He wanted to keep the rural areas rural, but RA needs to grow a little.

A resident felt the changes that were made were not widely distributed to the residents of the affected zones.

One resident spoke about a town meeting system, where zoning is accomplished by vote at town meeting. He wondered how the Council received public comment on zoning changes instead of comments from the influence groups.

A resident said her property was rezoned from Farm & Forest to RA and she was not notified. She wanted to have her property return to Farm & Forest.

A resident said there has been a sharp increase in development in his area; it now feels more like Portland. The character has changed due to the infill.

A resident objected to the village center; it looks like the mall area in South Portland. They need to be careful with what they build on Route 1; it is rare to see people walking on the sidewalks on Route 1 because there are no neighborhoods there. The commercial areas should have places that people want to walk to, restaurants and coffee shops for example. He wasn't going to walk to Walmart or the grocery store.

A resident said the setbacks on Route 9 have changed to 15 feet and pointed out that the plans to improve Route 100 had issues due to how close the homes were to the street.

A resident pointed out that it isn't safe to walk on Falmouth Road. it wouldn't be safe for his kids to bike to school. Part of the nice character is providing a place for people to walk around. They need places to walk and bike; it would improve the beauty and the character.

A resident said the traffic has changed on Route 1 after the infrastructure improvement and the sidewalk. There is slower traffic, people are using the bus, and walking and biking along the corridor.

Mr. Freshley reviewed the comments on school capacity, taxes and property values.

A resident said his understanding was that the schools were at or near capacity and wondered what happens where there is no more space.

Mr. Freshley asked if the increase in density would lead to both more students, but also more tax base. The resident thought developers were not required to pay a fee based on the increase in services for the increased population.

Another resident argued that if the stress is on low-cost housing, the value increase would not go up at a rate to cover the increase.

A resident said every student in the district costs \$11,000/year. If a house has a tax bill of \$4000/year and has two kids in the school district, they will never break even. It used to be people lived here, raised their family here, and stayed here their whole lives. That doesn't happen anymore. They have people coming, using the facilities and schools, and leaving as soon as their kids graduate. There is no time when that home generates enough taxes to offset the cost.

A resident said she has 4 children in the schools and they are already overcrowded. The classes and facilities are cramped and cannot accommodate a huge influx of students.

Mr. Freshley summarized the comments: the town should not have policies that attract families because it would impact the schools. A resident disagreed; he didn't think people didn't want density, but that a zoning change was instituted 3 years ago that people didn't know about and it has hurt the town. He thought the town needed to be smart about it.

Mr. Freshley said if they do want to attract low-income people and families with children, how do they suggest it be done other than the density zoning changes.

One resident suggested that they could decide where the density should be located.

Another resident said his concern was about traffic issues more than density.

One resident thought Falmouth was already growing before the zoning change; this change supercharged it. He felt the growth was uncontrolled; it needs to happen sustainably.

Mr. Freshley asked about open space. One resident appreciated the open space and felt it was important that it stays. People have different ideas on what density is; people think that taking that land and breaking it into two acre lots is preserving open space and it is not. She would prefer to see a more village type development and preserve the farmland and open fields. She thought there is a comfort level in neighborhoods, where houses are built with enough elbow room and there is connections with neighbors. Sidewalks accomplish this.

A resident thought people are thinking about farm land and pasture when they talk about preserving open space, but she worried about the mentality of sacrificing the east side of Falmouth to growth in favor of preserving the west. She would like to look at the town holistically and consider the character of the whole town.

Mr. Freshley said there were many concerns about traffic on the board and asked for comments. No one spoke about traffic.

Mr. Freshley asked if anyone wanted to speak about affordable housing. A resident felt Falmouth has affordable housing now; it doesn't have to be about new homes. There are plenty of houses around and there are rentals available.

Mr. Freshley opened a time for public comment. One resident wanted a pass to use the spur. Another resident asked if anyone could speak about why the zoning changes were made in 2013.

Mr. Freshley summarized the comments made at the meeting. Residents have expressed concerns about the process, that public comment is heard, that the public is informed, that there is consideration of the impacts of change. What people love about the town is here already, they like it the way it is. People want change to be slow, incremental and thoughtful. Changes in the last few years have been too fast. There is concern about the change to the character of the town; they like it the way it is and don't want to see changes to the population or the way it looks. Many others would like the character changed in some ways, with an increase in pedestrian activity and sidewalks, with connections to commercial areas, and changes to traffic. There were concerns about large scale development and developers. People are more okay with small subdivisions than a large-scale development. There was concern about the pace of change.