

2005 CFE Newsletter

Commercial Zoning in Easton?

As Easton draws closer to completing and unveiling the long-awaited Plan of Conservation and Development, discussion of creating a commercial zone in town has resurfaced. The Plan includes the creation of a “village district” (a tool granted to Planning and Zoning Commissions by state statute to help preserve the historic integrity and character of significant areas and buildings) that our P & Z may choose to adopt. While there has been some confusion as to the intent of this concept, it is most assuredly not a means to change zoning, but intended as a tool for preservation.

That being said, there are some seeking to open Easton to commercial zoning, the primary impetus being a desire for tax relief. In the face of the Barlow renovation and construction of the new elementary school on Morehouse Road, controlling taxes is a concern to every Easton resident. Given the risks inherent in opening the town to commercial zoning, it is essential that the merit of such a basis for zoning change be assured. Three elements must be weighed as a change is considered in the zoning that has so ably protected the town for over thirty years.

- How do Easton's taxes compare with those of neighboring towns with commercial centers?
- What effect would commercialization have on our taxes?
- What long term impact would changing zoning to allow commercial development have on the town?

It has been claimed that changing Easton's zoning to allow a “charming village center” would not affect zoning throughout the rest of the town. However, spot zoning (a provision in a zoning plan, or modification of such plan, that affects only the use of a particular piece of property or a small group of adjoining properties and is not related to the general plan for the community as a whole) is illegal, and we need look no further than Black Rock Turnpike in Fairfield or Route 25 in Monroe to see that the danger of that slippery slope is real. Some say, “That won't happen here,” yet neither of these highly traveled thoroughfares of commerce was planned in their current form; they evolved as pressure to expand commercial areas continued. To think that Easton can control such development where others have failed is to discount the very forces that serve to gain financially and are working so hard to make the changes threatening the town now.

Citizens for Easton has taken the position that Easton's zoning should be preserved. Our current zoning laws have been in place since 1941 and were enacted to control development while safeguarding the many wetlands and woodlands that protect the public drinking supply. As our town's current stewards, we bear a responsibility for the Easton that we pass on to the generations that follow.

We are extraordinarily fortunate that over 50% of Easton has been preserved in perpetuity. Our winding country roads, largely free of traffic, are bordered by ancient stone walls, open fields and towering trees that shade homes that have stood for centuries. In Easton, the rugged agricultural heritage upon which New England's history and economy were founded is still a living part of town life. Due to wise zoning, the stewardship of Aquarion, the interest and investment of the Nature Conservancy, the state, and private individuals, we enjoy an unparalleled quality of life and purity of air and water.

There is much to risk in opening the town to commercial zoning. As we look at what some hope to gain, we must scrutinize the elements that we stand to lose – and weigh what we are willing to sacrifice.

Advocacy Made Easy... Little things Can Make a Big Difference

Keep in mind what makes Easton a unique community when assessing proposed policies or town actions.

Get Educated

- Read local papers (Easton Courier, Connecticut Post, Fairfield Minuteman) and community mailings to be aware of proposals that may adversely impact the quality of life in Easton.
- Call Easton town hall (268-6291) to find out more about issues that are being discussed, who is making the decisions, and when the decisions are being made.
- Consult community resources like Citizens For Easton to learn about pressing issues and to help you understand technical information that often lies at the heart of development and zoning issues.

Be Heard

- Write letters to relevant town decision makers (such as Board of Selectmen, Conservation Commission, Planning and Zoning Commission, Board of Finance). Outline your concerns and request responses to questions you have. Send them to: Name of Recipient(s)/Commission, Easton Town Hall, 225 Center Road, Easton, Connecticut 06612.
- Share your concerns in letters-to-the-editor of local newspapers. Keep your thoughts brief, clear, and professional. Note what your concern is and how you want the town to respond. Address your letter "To the Editor" and give your name, address and phone number. Send to all three local newspapers, via US mail, fax or email. Follow up to ensure your letter was received: Connecticut Post: 410 State Street, Bridgeport, CT 06604 or edit@ctpost.com, Minuteman: 1492 Post Road, Fairfield, CT 06824 or news@fairfieldminuteman.com, Easton Courier: 1000 Bridgeport Avenue, Shelton, CT 06484 or east-encourier@add-inc.com.

Attend Town Meetings

- Find out when and where your concern will be discussed in public forums and attend. Meeting times are posted in the paper or call the Easton town hall (268-6291). You don't have to stay for the whole meeting! Again, call town hall to learn where on the agenda your concern is listed and to get a feel for when it will come up. If established meetings are not sufficient for you to engage in a dialogue, don't hesitate to request separate meetings or phone calls with the parties above to discuss your concerns.

Reach out to others in the community

- Simple acts like talking to neighbors, friends and family about your concerns can help mobilize other residents to become involved.
- Attend a Citizens for Easton meeting and be inspired by other citizens who are committed to preserving the Easton we know and love.

Former CFE Board Member, Charlie Dragonette

Charlie was a long-time Board member with a deep devotion to the rural qualities of Easton and he worked hard to articulate what is important in our town to save and why we should work to preserve it. With Charlie's gift for words and his experience in advertising, he had a skill for getting concise information out in a compelling manner.

Charlie led the fight to maintain the small road characteristics of Route 136 when the State threatened to widen and straighten it. He joined forces with Aspetuck Land Trust to preserve the Four Corners, the intersection of Route 58 and Route 136 when Bridgeport Hydraulic Company considered selling off one of the corners. He pretty much single-handedly ran Citizen for Easton's photography contest which promoted the rural beauty of Easton, and the winning photos provided the cover pictures for our Annual Report for many years. He led CFE's efforts to pass a town scenic road ordinance to preserve our local roads, and then went on to help get State Scenic Road designation for Route 58. He tirelessly worked for the preservation of Trout Brook Valley and never missed an opportunity to send in or round up others to send letters to the editor. He tenaciously defended Easton's zoning issues.

Charlie understood what it meant to live in a community and he worked hard to keep it a very unique place to live and raise a family. Citizens for Easton and the town of Easton will miss him dearly.