

**HARVARD PLANNING BOARD
MEETING MINUTES
April 8, 2022
APPROVED: MAY 16, 2022**

Chair Justin Brown called the meeting to order in person at Upper Town Hall at 1:15pm and virtually in accordance with the Governor's Executive Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law, under M.G.L. Chapter 40A and Code of the Town of Harvard Chapter 125. Meeting was hybrid with in person attendees and remote attendees via Zoom platform.

Members Present: Justin Brown, Doug Thornton, Stacia Donahue

Others Present: Christopher Ryan (Director of Community and Economic Development), John Osborn (Harvard Press), Val Hurley (Harvard Press), Tim Bragan (Town Administrator), Lynn Kelly (Town Clerk), Deb Thompson (COA Director), State Representative Dan Sena (37th Middlesex District), State Senator Jamie Eldridge, Daniel Szetela (Assistant to Representative Sena), Bianca DeSousa (Assistant to Senator Eldridge) and Thomas Kilian (Harvard Press photographer)

Review of the Ayer Road Vision Plan Project

Ryan opened the meeting with a few introductions of the key people involved with the Ayer Road Commercial District Vision Plan and thanked both Senator Eldredge and Representative Sena for attending our meeting to hear about the plan.

Brown reviewed a presentation describing the 3-step approach the Town is trying to take to achieve an improvement to the commercial corridor on Ayer Road that is in line with what the Town wants to see. Phase 1 is the market analysis that is currently on-going. Phase 1 was originally funded by Select Board, but the Town won approval for a grant to cover the cost of this phase.

If Phase 1 returns with positive results, then the Town Planning Board and Select Board will continue with Phase 2 which will be the vision plan. This phase will involve citizen outreach to develop a clear idea of what the people of Harvard want to see in the commercial district and what they don't want to see that is also informed by the Phase I Market Analysis. The Town would be looking to hire professional consultants to help with this phase so that many voices can be heard and consensus can be built for the vision. Phase 3 would create zoning language of the Phase II vision in a graphical format called Form-Based code. Due to the technical complexity, a consultant would guide this phase. Brown explained that currently our zoning bylaw for the commercial district is just written text. A properly written form-based code gives clear guidelines and graphics about what the zoning should be to achieve the vision the Town created in Phase 2.

Ryan reviewed our current statistics and zoning restrictions on the commercial corridor. The restrictions and lack of infrastructure have led to a commercial district that is sparsely populated and not revenue producing for the Town. Nearly all commercial monies spent by townspeople are spent at businesses outside of Harvard.

Ryan reiterated the desire of the Planning Board and Select Board engage with the citizenry to determine a vision for the corridor and then provide clear zoning to reflect this vision. Ryan noted that Harvard has applied for many grants to help the Town with this 3-phase project. He noted that Harvard is almost always turned down and that he hoped with a better understanding of what we're trying to do, that we might be more successful in the future with our grant applications.

Brown reviewed the desired timing of the proposed plan. Ideally the vision plan and zoning would come first, followed by water and sewer infrastructure upgrades, and last would be the re-pavement and improvement of Ayer Road. The Transportation Improvement Project (TIP) for

Ayer Road commercial corridor for the repaving is currently slated for 2026 with MassDOT and sets a timeframe for the first two actions.

Brown closed the presentation and all interested participants left Town Hall for the COA vans for a tour of the district.

Tour of Ayer Road Commercial District

Stop 1 – 188 Ayer Road (Bower’s Brook parcel)

Ryan reviewed the project at this location as the example of the Town’s Ayer Road Village Special Permit (ARV-SP). This parcel includes a mix of retail, commercial office building, and residential all interconnected on the same parcel. Ryan explained that with the ARV-SP the Harvard residents had achieved at making something better in the district, but he hoped that new zoning would go even further with design and connectivity. Ryan also pointed out the empty and underutilized parcels across the street.

Stop 2 – 215 Ayer Road (Post Office)

Ryan noted that the owner of this parcel would like to further develop this parcel, but lack of infrastructure has hampered further development.

Stop 3 – 16 Lancaster County Road

Thompson introduced this parcel as the soon-to-be home of the Council on Aging (COA) and how the new expanded capacity at this facility will serve the senior population of Harvard so much better than the current cramped facilities near Town Hall. It was noted the proximity to the McCurdy Track complex and the Post Office was very nice for the seniors. It was also noted that trail improvements that connect Lancaster County Road to Depot Road and a possible new trail connection to connect Old Mill Road to Devens would be nice for biking and walking in this area of Town. The TIP project would also bring a shared use path (SUP) near to this area to connect the COA to Ayer Road. However, there are concerns about traffic getting to and from the senior center and it was noted that nobody on the tour felt it would be safe enough in its current condition to walk from the COA to the Dunkin Donuts up the street.

Stop 4 – 264 Ayer Road (Three Seasons Landscaping)

Ryan noted that we have multiple landscaping business located on Ayer Road as it is one of the few allowed uses in the corridor. Currently there are 3 with another in the permitting process for a possible total of 4. Additionally, Ryan noted that the Town is facing a new unfriendly 40B project on the parcel across the street at the corner of Old Mill Road and Ayer Road. This parcel will be lost from the commercial district if the project moves forward as housing.

Stop 5 – 285 Ayer Road (Sorento’s Plaza)

Ryan pointed out the underutilized and rather unattractive layout of this parcel. He also noted that it’s a large parcel, but yet the parking lot directly abuts wetlands at the back and lacks any filtering or mitigation design. Ryan hoped that new zoning would increase requirements for stormwater runoff and climate impact mitigation design by requiring a buffer zone between parking and protected areas. Brown pointed to the multiple curb cuts for each individual parcel to Ayer Road visible from this location. Debbie Thompson remarked that this illustration finally clarified the proposed improvement and recommended that this aspect be shared in future outreach on the project.

Stop 6 – 325 Ayer Road – (open parcel across from Appleworks)

Ryan pointed out the orchard (agricultural use) next to the industrial looking use and how there are residential parcels mixed in as well as Ayer Road heads north. He stressed the importance of strong zoning to maintain a harmony in some way even though the parcels are all very different in size and layout. Again, it was pointed out that lack of sewer and water infrastructure along the corridor was really preventing development. However, having proper zoning in place before any

infrastructure was improved would be the only way to ensure maintaining Harvard's unique character.
Tour concluded with many thanks to all who participated and a group photo was taken by the COA van.

Adjournment

Donahue made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 2:57pm. Thornton seconded the motion. The vote was unanimously in favor of the motion.

Signed: _____ Stacia Donahue, PB Member