

Date: 10/23/17

To: Comprehensive Long Range Plan Committee

From: Terry Rothermel

Subject: Housing's Place in Long Range Planning

I. AFFORDABLE HOUSING "EXCEPT NOT ... "

"Objective H-4. In the 2005 Long Range Plan

"Locate housing in Village Centers or already built areas and avoid consuming Village green space, natural habitat and undeveloped land."

This statement restricting housing goals appeared in the section of the 2005 Plan dealing with Housing. Similar restrictions also appeared in our previous long-range plans. Thus, Housing, a major Town need, has been subordinated to another major Town need: Open Space. There can be little doubt that Open Space advocacy is the strongest political force in Concord. After all these Town Plans, however, I urge that Housing be released from such explicit Open Space restrictions this time around.

II. THE MYTH OF SMART GROWTH

-- IN THE CASE OF HOUSING IN CONCORD.

Too often, MA Smart Growth principles are used to prescribe town-center placement of affordable (and other) housing developments. The philosophy of the restriction being that such housing should be placed near our train stations so residents can better go to their work outside of Concord. Concord's experience belies that logic. The residents of affordable developments built by the Concord Housing Trust over the years tend to work in Concord: in our schools, in our businesses, and at Emerson hospital.

In your Committee's work to date, you have found that our business community would like to hire more workers from Concord, itself. Affordable housing increases the chances of local worker availability. Indeed, it may be that our trains are also serving to bring employees into our Town centers.

Oh, ... and residents of affordable housing do have cars. They should not be assumed to be so poor, that they cannot afford cars. Cars are a given in our metropolitan society. Low- and moderate-income families are not likely to do without cars just because they might live near our train stations.

III. SOME SMALL EVIDENCE OF HOUSING BEING SUBORDINATED IN THE WORKING DOCUMENTS OF THE COMMITTEE. (Yes, as a housing advocate, I am sensitive to possible nuance, whether intended or not.)

a. [C]ournal 8/17/17] “Consider zoning bylaw changes to protect natural resources while meeting future housing demands

This is different from wording in SWOT analysis (2.3). “It would be prudent to assess and update Zoning Bylaws to reflect this dynamic and protect the natural resources while meeting future housing and market demands.”

Again “housing” seems to equal affordable housing. Market-rate housing is the greater force and it should be the mentioned first.

b. [C]ournal 8/17/17] “The pace of development – including affordable and market priced housing – is not abating.”

Given that most developments are market-based, again why is affordable housing mentioned first?

c. [SWOT, 4.1] “Many residents still don’t see or understand why Concord needs affordable housing, and would prefer to see land used in other ways.”

If there is no desire to maintain some economic and demographic diversity in Concord [SWOT, 4.2], then scratch the need for affordable housing. If we would like to maintain our human landscape in Concord as well as maintain our natural landscape, then we very much need to “integrate” different town needs, e.g., within new land acquisitions. Open Space interests have been reluctant to agree to such integrated goals in past specific opportunities.

IV. OUTCOME OF YOUR MAY 31 HEARING AND DISCUSSION

As an advocate of maintaining demographic diversity and affordable (and other) housing needs in Concord, I was encouraged that the prevailing concern of the May 31 meeting was a new watershed of concern that unmet housing needs were atop the priorities of so many. I felt fulfilled, given the other important alternatives before that group.

Then I heard rumors that the Committee and/or its Consultants had partly written off that outcome as only the position of the gray hairs in town. Another interpretation of that meeting was that the “regulars” of our Town government and Town Meetings there determined that it was Housing ... not Open Space ... not Sustainability ... that first needed attention in Concord, no matter what the current process emphasizes.

V. CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

Will the land use opportunities for housing needs be less restrictive and more integrated in the 2018 Plan than in previous plans?

Will Smart Growth principles be examined as they specifically apply to Concord, and not asserted as a general -- “one size fits all”-- overlay?

Will the Committee be careful when it addresses development to put market housing as the greater force before affordable housing?

Will a separate focus group on Housing be held so that the Consultants understand the issues, successes, and challenges for housing diversity in this upscale town? (Being lumped in with Social Services was not enough, in my opinion.)

Will Concord’s need for maintaining diversity and affordable housing be able to stand out in the Committee’s final report, even though the theme is Sustainability? “Sustainability of our human landscape?”