

Growth center plan discussed in Pownal

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POWNAL — To complete a successful growth center application, the town has some things to consider, David Raphael, a planner for LandWorks, said at a community meeting on the Growth Center application Thursday night in the Pownal Elementary School.

Encourages growth

Growth centers are part of a voluntary Growth Center Program started by the state to encourage growth in village centers and prevent sprawl. LandWorks is an architectural planning company working with the town to complete the application process, along with another non-profit company, Smart Growth Vermont.

Jason van Driesche, Smart Growth program director, listed five areas the town needs to address before it submits its application to the state.

The conceptual drawings show the growth center covering the former Green Mountain Race Track and Pownal Center. Van Driesche said the area might be considered large compared to the amount of development the town is expecting, but said the state tends to be lenient when it comes to growth center sizes.

He cautioned against making the growth center too large, saying it isn't desirable to only have a third of the growth center developed within 20 years.

So far, there has been no solid answer from the state on the exact limits regarding development in the floodplains within the growth center, van Driesche said. Before the application can be submitted, detailed data will need to be collected.

Part of the application process, van Driesche said, is that the town needs to show the state it plans to see growth within the next 20 years. According to projections done by LandWorks, Pownal is projected to see an increase in housing and residents and a decline in industrial and retail services.

Pownal Center lacks a village green and businesses, which means it has a bigger case to make for being a village core, van Driesche said. More has to be created from scratch in order to build off it. He cited Bennington's recent approval for a growth center, saying Bennington has a downtown it can consider a central location for development.

Raphael said a build-out plan and a capital budget plan have to be completed. The build-out plan includes conceptual designs for the growth center, which were discussed in small groups made of community members who attended the meeting.

He stressed the conceptual nature of the build-out drawings and said there was no intention of developing anyone's property for them.

The capital budget plan is like a town budget, Raphael said, only it takes into account expenditures for the next few decades. Town equipment, roads, and sewer systems are covered under the capital budget.

Van Driesche had suggestions for integrating the town's existing bylaws and zoning regulations with the growth center, making them work together. He said the town should rework its Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) to favor the growth center.

Van Driesche said the current town bylaws basically allow a developer to buy density from other landowners. He said someone from within the village could develop their property at a higher density than normally allowed, by first purchasing the development rights off a more rural zone. He said the TDR is a voluntary, individually negotiated, free-market mechanism intended to concentrate development within a certain area, and suggested that area be shrunk to fit the growth center.

Van Driesche said properties within the growth center would be assumed by the state to have already met a major criteria for tax increment financing (TIF). TIFs are financial mechanisms the state sometimes allows towns to use to help with development, van Driesche said.

Properties with tax increment financing have a portion of their tax increments that would otherwise go to the state education fund, go toward town infrastructure instead, for a number of years.

The town's sewer infrastructure map already favors existing village centers, van Driesche said, adding it already served to concentrate growth. He said the maps should further favor the growth center.

Currently, the town's zoning bylaws have between one and two acre lot sizes in the village area. Van Driesche suggested making the minimum lot sizes in residential rural areas larger, while making them smaller in the growth center village area.

Select Board member Harry Percey asked if the growth center's incentives would discourage "green power." He said that if the growth center were trying to capture a "New England" look, it might make it difficult for someone to place solar panels on their roof.

Raphael said such a constraint would go against what the growth centers are attempting to do, and "green power" would not be discouraged. He said Pownal's growth center might even favor "green" technologies and industries because Bennington's growth center favors industry, while Manchester's proposed growth center will favor retail.

Van Driesche said filling the "green niche" would help Pownal get accepted, as growth centers are not allowed to compete with one another or work to another center's detriment. "You can't all be drinking out of the same glass, essentially," he said.

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