

Pownal citizens weigh growth center strategies

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POWNAL — The future of development in the town was discussed by members of the community, the Select Board, and developers on Thursday at the elementary school.

The meeting focused on the town's application for a state growth center designation. The town is working with Smart Growth Vermont, a non-profit organization, and through Smart Growth has hired a consulting company called LandWorks to complete the application process.

Select Board Chairman Nelson Brownell said the town has worked with LandWorks in the past when it updated the sewer system.

Smart growth plan

Noelle Mackay, executive director for Smart Growth Vermont, said the Growth Center Program was established by the Legislature in 2006 to encourage dense, centralized growth in existing town centers in order to prevent scattered development over the rural landscape. The program is voluntary, she said.

Mackay said that the prime benefit to having a growth center was that development within the center was subject to a more streamlined Act 250 process. It also allows the town to establish Tax Increment Financing districts, in which up to 75 percent of revenue collected from the education property tax could be reallocated to fund infrastructure improvements within the growth center.

Projects within growth centers are also given priority for state grants, she said.

The current map of the potential growth center encompasses Pownal Center and the former Green Mountain Race Track. At the meeting, the general consensus was that it made the most sense to put the growth center there.

Frank Cantatore, of Progress Partners Ltd., a company based in White Plains, N.Y., attended the meeting to hear feedback from the community as well as outline what his company would like to do with the former race track.

Cantatore said that while the current national financial climate has slowed the project down, work on the race track site has not stopped. He said that even before the credit crisis, capital

conduits were tightening and that now, with the crisis, projects that are not currently funded have to go through a longer process.

"Fortunately, good projects like the track are still marketable," Cantatore said in a later e-mail. "It just takes a longer time, especially with one of this magnitude and diversity."

Kathy Gaffney raised some concern on the type of housing the growth center would seek to encourage. She said that if the town's goal in encouraging growth was to increase the tax base, it made little sense to focus on cheap housing and lower-income jobs. She said that in past meetings regarding the growth center application as well as the racetrack's development, residents expressed a desire to see recreation- and entertainment-based jobs.

"I don't want to be exclusive towards any housing use," Cantatore said. He added that the kind of housing they were looking to encourage was "work force housing," not "affordable housing." He said affordable housing suggested subsidized housing, which wasn't necessarily the case.

Part of the evening's agenda was for those present to break into smaller groups and discuss certain questions. At the end of the meeting, a spokesman from each group outlined to the rest what their respective group had talked about.

Brownell said that his group wanted to make sure that anything the town decided was both good for the town and for potential developers. He said that more than one owner should own property within the growth center, so as not to "put all our eggs in one basket." Keeping the rural character of the area was also a concern, and to that end Brownell said his group did not want to see housing structures over four stories.

Pauline Guntlow, a member of the Pownal Affordable Housing Committee, and spokesperson for her group, said they wanted the flood plain near the racetrack looked into to make sure it was up to date and fully understood. She said that some open space should be left in the village, and that perhaps a design competition for the town could be held for the town's 250th anniversary in 2010.

Peter Hopkins said his group also wanted the flood plain requirements examined, and for the growth center to target specialty shops while keeping the rural look of the area as well as allowing "green" technology.

Smart Grown program Director Jason van Driesche's group wanted to see the growth center encompass the area of land on the other side of the river, adjacent to the race track. Senior housing, a village green, and sidewalks were also desired, along with keeping events like the Tri-State Fair and the Bennington Car Show in the area.

General questions about the potential growth center were also addressed. Mackay said that a growth center had to be adjacent to a village center or a "downtown" area. She said the growth center had to be in one piece in response to a question of whether or not the growth center could be divided up to cover the other two Pownal villages.

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