

Real Estate: Sprawl busters for Route 9 corridor

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Planners look for new ways to control growth along Route 9 corridor

MetroWest builders say a proposal to replace Route 9's strip malls with "smart growth" developments is like merchandise at Spencer Gifts — it looks cool, but it may not be worth the money. "Revamping Route 9 is a good idea, but so much of this starts with the retailers," said Todd Finard of Finard Properties, owner of the 9/27 strip mall in Natick. "If retailers don't believe in the concept, we're not going to build it."

The MetroWest Regional Collaborative is developing a proposal that aims to convert Route 9 between Wellesley and Southborough from a jumble of shopping centers to a pedestrian-friendly mix of retail, offices, housing and parks. Under the plan, shops, office space, restaurants and housing would be built in a single complex, so that some suburbanites wouldn't have to get in their cars every time they wanted to go someplace.

"We wanted to see if you could create a different pattern for Route 9 than the sprawl that's been developing there for many years," said Bruce Leish, the group's director. "The idea is to enable people to park once and walk or even live in one of these developments."

Using a \$42,000 federal grant, the collaborative is crafting a proposal to change zoning in Wellesley, Natick, Framingham and Southborough so builders could construct denser developments if they agreed to smart-growth principles. Leish doesn't expect landowners to replace the Natick Mall or Framingham's Shoppers World overnight. But he insists developers and local officials could collaborate to change Route 9's face by 2032.

"The old Shoppers World lasted 43 years before being torn down, and the version that's there now has already been there 20 years," Leish said. "All of these developments tend to be rethought every 30 or 40 years, so it's reasonable to assume that within 20 years."

He added that his research found that leaving zoning unchanged would increase congestion along Route 9, while smart-growth principles could limit the growth of store footprints and, in turn, curb future increases in traffic. Local developers like the idea, but want to see numbers proving they would recoup the cost of pricey amenities like underground parking.

"We will develop this if the tenants are willing and able to pay for more-expensive spaces, which they'll be able to do if these designs mean greater sales for them," Finard said.

He added that increased density — possibly two or three times what current zoning allows — could also make such projects viable.

“Would I like to see 10-story apartment buildings on top of shopping malls? Probably not,” said Susan Bernstein a member of Framingham’s planning board. “But if there’s a way to do a combination of usages, that might be very appealing. The devil will be in the details.”

But one attempt at putting housing in a Route 9 shopping area didn’t turn out so well. Bankrupt mall operator General Growth Properties auctioned off more than 40 high-end condominiums attached to the upscale mall with bids starting at \$160,000, or 70 percent below previous asking prices. The 215-unit Nouvelle at Natick opened in 2008, but just 37 of the residences sold or were placed under agreement before the auction was held in 2009 to jump-start sales.

James Gordon of Framingham’s Gordon Real Estate, which owns five Route 9 buildings, said the plan could be a positive for the area. But Gordon cautioned about spending a significant amount of dollars without being certain about the economic return. “We have to be realistic,” he said.