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West

# Planners offer vision for Route 9

By John Swinconeck | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 26, 2013

NATICK — Planners envision a renaissance of the commercial landscape along Route 9, replacing vast, street-front parking lots with buildings and adding public squares, housing, and walkways.

Those ambitious goals face myriad hurdles, however, requiring approval from developers, planning and zoning boards, as well as taxpayers.

“It’s not something that’s going to happen two to five years from now. Maybe, five, ten, twenty years from now,” said Bruce Leish, director of the MetroWest Regional Collaborative. “The next steps would be to see if the towns adopt these concepts in zoning, and see what it takes for developers to do it.”

The collaborative, part of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, held its last public meeting Monday on its “smart growth” plan focusing on stretches of Route 9 in Natick, Framingham, and Southborough.

“We all have a choice,” Leish said. “The planning boards have a choice of how much you want to implement.”

Development along Route 9 between Southborough and Wellesley could increase by 88 percent if the area is built out under current zoning, leading to a 41 percent increase in traffic, according to the collaborative.

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Using so-called smart growth concepts designed to accommodate more walking, bicycling, and public transit, Leish said, that square footage could be increased by 61 percent while traffic would increase by only 20 percent.

Sometimes known as "sprawl repair," smart growth offers an alternative to strip malls, using compact, mixed-use developments, tree-lined boulevards, and highly visible crosswalks. They are designed to be easily accessible on foot, on bike, and by public transit.

The collaborative is focusing the Fayville section of Southborough, the Framingham Centre area near Framingham State University, and the so-called Golden Triangle retail zone, which includes Shoppers World, Sherwood Plaza, and the Natick Mall.

The collaborative has suggested connecting Shoppers World with Sherwood Plaza, on the other side of Route 9, via a pedestrian bridge on which additional retail could sit. It also envisions a road connecting Mill Street and the West Natick train station to the south of Route 9, and on the north side, a direct connection to the Massachusetts Turnpike.

At the time of its opening in 1951, Shoppers World was billed as a "kinder, gentler shopping center," according to a historic photograph.

When it was torn down and rebuilt four decades later, it became a sea of asphalt and big-box retail chains. Gone were the petting zoo, elephant rides, and other esoteric bits of Americana that Shoppers World hosted. It has also lost its original anchor, Jordan Marsh, and smaller stores with local connections.

Planners at the collaborative hope to bring back some of the original spirit.

"Shoppers World was always meant to feel like a street," said Leish. "You want this whole thing to function as a mini urban village."

*With respect to the Golden Triangle, we'll have a joint conversation with Natick. There'll be questions. What are the costs going to be for that pedestrian bridge? What are the costs to the developers?*

On Tuesday, Framingham Planning Board member Stephanie Mercandetti said a recent Town Meeting decision to fund an overhaul of the community's zoning bylaws could present an opportunity to examine the smart growth proposals.

"With respect to the Golden Triangle, we'll have a joint conversation with Natick," Mercandetti said. "There'll be questions. What are the costs going to be for that pedestrian bridge? What are the costs to the developers? That will need to be vetted by the Planning Board and the stakeholders, developers, property owners, and businesses."

On Monday, Leish said that convincing developers to adopt smart growth policies would be part of a "negotiating strategy," and may require some sweetening with tax incentives. He also said public-private partnerships may be needed to provide additional funding.

Speaking after Monday's meeting, Sara Hines, a member of Ashland's Redevelopment Authority, said she was concerned that many of the smart growth developments appeared to be centered on service-oriented businesses, such as retail stores and restaurants.

"Retail has hit its limits," Hines said. "After the recession, it was clear that we have more than we need or can support."

Framingham resident Bob Gentile was quick to point out that the wages paid to employees of those businesses are often low.

"All I can see is, 'Do you want fries with that?'" Gentile said. "If you only have certain kinds of jobs here, you lose that concept of 'you live where you work.'"

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