Letter to Editor

Rockport Select Board Comprehensively Addresses Off-Street Parking

Some residents have raised concerns and inquiries about why the Rockport Select Board would vote to recommend an ordinance that would exempt the Downtown District from the off-street parking requirements. It was the Board’s determination that this issue needs to be addressed head-on and comprehensively, not piece-meal as some have advocated.

As a preliminary matter, any changes to parking requirements in the Land Use Ordinance must go through a Town vote and will not affect the proposed hotel currently under consideration before the Planning Board. The Select Board recognizes the Town’s obligations to address the Downtown District parking issues and is doing so. Town staff, including the Chiefs of Police and Fire, are updating the current parking inventory and considering other options for increasing available parking. In addition, discussions are taking place with developers and property owners to determine the potential for additional off-street parking opportunities. Because these involve potential contract negotiations, the details cannot yet be public.

The problem with the parking requirements in the current Land Use Ordinance is that it makes it impossible for any development in the downtown area, yet revitalization of the downtown is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. This dilemma is being faced by municipalities across the country. We encourage all residents to review the Livestream of the December 19, 2019 Planning Board meeting and note the comments of Architect Steve Smith, observing that relaxing or exempting off-street parking standards is a nationwide trend in recognition of the fact that requiring the construction of parking lots is inconsistent with redevelopment. The Livestream illustrates that the Ordinance Review Committee voted unanimously in 2015 to exempt the Downtown District but a clerical error caused the ordinance change not to be on the ballot. The comments of Kerry Leichtman and Steve Smith during their tenures on the Planning Board and ZBA, respectively, illustrate that both boards have historically relaxed or waived the parking standards in the downtown area in favor of redevelopment as is allowed under the current ordinance. Steve Smith also spoke to the market-driven nature of businesses and how they have a strong incentive to make parking work or face the failure of their business. This requires businesses to work with the Town to devise creative workable and successful resolutions—the direction being pursued by the Select Board.

The Select Board has expressed the view that it makes little sense to leave in place parking requirements in an ordinance that has historically been waived by either the Planning Board or ZBA. Additionally, leaving this situation in place invites inconsistent rules being imposed on developers. Courts rely on precedent in order to treat people equitably and fairly and we should expect no less from our municipalities.

The not unique parking problem that Rockport faces should be treated comprehensively by the Town. In recent years it appears to have been addressed by not addressing it—consistently waiving the parking requirements in the ordinance for good reason in favor of revitalization and increasing the tax base — but not addressing it head-on. We hope that residents understand that this Select Board is undertaking the effort to tackle the issue directly which will hopefully be a win-win for all of us and all of the projects in Town.
Rockport Select Board
Debra Hall
Denise Kennedy-Munger
Doug Cole
Jeff Hamilton
Mark Kelley