

OPINION

**My View: Who should determine our villages' future?**

By John Crow

The Town of Barnstable used to update our Local Comprehensive Plan (“the Plan”) about every five years (although our current plan was adopted in 2010). The Plan captures our vision. It’s a source of information about existing and anticipated conditions and assets, and it’s a Master Guide for future decision making. It sets parameters and lays out strategies for planning and land use goals, a capital facilities and infrastructure plan, and a housing plan, among others. It shapes our future and helps to assure all are marching in the same direction.

First, a quick word about the current Plan. The 2010 Plan was the product of three years of inclusive public participation and village visioning. It is comprised of four sections, one of which is focused solely on the seven villages.

Each of Barnstable’s seven villages worked on their Village Plan. They fed into the comprehensive Town Plan. In other words, for our villages, it was a “bottoms up” process, not a “top-down” exercise.

The first goal of the current Plan reads: “Sustain diverse villages and livable neighborhoods for year-round residents while providing housing opportunities for all.”

This goal lines up well with the very first clause of the Town Hall’s Planning Department’s job as set out in the Town Code: “The purpose of the Planning and Development Department is to preserve the character of the seven villages....”. It goes on, but the focus on character and villages is explicit, and in the forefront.

I share that history because I sense there is a shift coming, and it's worrisome, as it appears that the aforementioned focus on preserving the character of the seven villages will be terminated in future plans.

Here are a just a few facts to explain that worry. These are facts, not views.

The Planning Department has announced that Village Plans will not be included in any future plans. In response to a question I asked about this at a public meeting, the answer from the Planning Director was that the Town has made a decision to take a different direction, and will instead, in her words, "Zoom Out." We can readily determine this to mean that the Town staff does not want the plan to originate from our villages. One could also interpret this to mean that overall, the Planning Department does not value the input from the public in the generation of the next plan.

The worrisome thing is that there has not been any community conversation or input about abandoning Village Plans. No one has even posed the question, much less taken the temperature of the community. There have not been any Town Council deliberations about abandoning Village Plans. The issue has not been on any agenda of any public body. So, who at Town Hall made the decision to abandon them?

Town Hall has not yet put out a Request for Proposals for a consultant to work on the Plan, so the shift away from Village Plans didn't come from that quarter (opinion: a consultant isn't the right entity to make that decision for us in any case). Nonetheless, someone has made a decision to abandon Village Plans, and did that before the very first community conversation about the Plan ever occurred.

Here, I'll break from facts and give an opinion: I don't think it's proper for such a decision to be made by a Town Hall department before the process even starts, before the first community discussion.

What Town Hall said we'll get instead? Forums and Committees. But input solely through town forums and committees is simply not an effective substitute for organic village plans.

I was part of Voices of the Villages, which was the impetus for the Village Plans. It was a great experience that enabled us to exercise our civic duty and invested our neighbors in the process. I think the citizens of Barnstable deserve to know the rationale that supports the elimination of this part of the process, and who made this decision for us, before any community or public body conversation.

Why does process matter to you and your neighborhood? Here are examples of the worrisome things that may happen when the plan that supports the vision for our villages – and, therefore, your neighborhood – is tossed aside.

We heard from the Town’s Planning Department Director, in 2020, that single-family residential zoning is a problem to solve: it was described as a “burden” on the community. The director also said an Accessory Dwelling Unit proposed ordinance was a “baby step” to “pushing back” on the “legacy” of single-family residential zoning.

Similarly, in response to a real estate developer’s interest in “creating two-family homes as of right,” the Town housing staff asked if a proposed zoning change to allow Accessory Dwelling Units with no owner occupancy requirement and both units rentable comes “close” to two-family homes everywhere by right?

These two provisions that financially interested parties have requested – and that Barnstable has incorporated in its proposal – would make Barnstable stand apart from every other Accessory Dwelling Unit proposal or adopted ordinances on Cape Cod, with the exception of Provincetown. All other towns’ rules stick to the purpose of Accessory Dwelling Units – to allow homeowners to build and rent small structures either within or on their own properties, and, if preferred, live in them and rent their larger home for an affordable amount, as life circumstances change.

Another example of concern: Town staff reported that it worked with a consultant on a zoning change called “form-based code,” which staff described as zoning for “more of what a building looks like and not worry about the use.” Be ready to listen for more references about why we shouldn’t worry about how properties are used in the Plan.

Town staff has had many more off-the-record, private discussions over the last few years with groups it convened that bear directly on the Plan, including zoning and housing. The public was not notified about all these meetings, and we'll never know what was discussed, as the Town did not follow the law and keep meeting minutes of related subcommittees. I asked for them. I received no reply from the Planning Department.

The Plan, and the process that generates it, needs to reflect our views, our vision for our neighborhoods, and all of our villages – without the color of preferences from Town staff we pay to run the process.

When you hear talk about the 2021 Local Comprehensive Plan, know it will set a stage for what our community looks like in 2031. Ask yourself if "the Planning and Development Department is preserving the character of the seven villages." Please weigh in and define the future for your home, your neighborhood, your Village, your Town.

*The author is the president of the Osterville Village Association.*