

Potential Senior Living Project – Former Benny’s Plaza

On Tuesday, May 5, at joint meeting of the Select Board and Planning Board, a development group presented a conceptual idea for the area known as Benny’s Plaza. On May 27, at a joint meeting of the Planning Board and the North Plymouth and Plymouth Center Steering Committees, further details were provided regarding a plan for a senior living community, as well as some additional small residential and commercial spaces. Residents were given the opportunity to ask questions and offer input.

- Normally, the residents (and even many officials) wouldn’t hear about such an idea until such time as a formal proposal was presented for approval. However, in an effort to provide greater transparency, at the request of the Planning Board (specifically myself as its chair), the developers agreed to participate in early public forums to allow people to learn about what is being considered.
- This is in advance of still further presentations and hearings (before the Planning Board and the Zoning Board of Appeals at a minimum) before any approvals are given.

Here are some of the issues which have been considered so far:

1. “Affordability”

Unlike an apartment building or a subdivision, this project would not be subject to our inclusionary (affordable) housing bylaw, meaning they are not required to include affordable units.

- That is because the proposal is for a senior residence which includes services such as providing meals, lifecare assistance, or skilled memory care is considered a commercial enterprise. This places it in the same classification as a hotel.
- And like a hotel, we can’t demand that it make its rooms and services available at a particular cost.

There have been efforts to bring an “affordable” assisted living residence in Plymouth for over a decade.

- However, due to the rising costs associated with their construction and operation coupled with the reduction/elimination of many of the tax credits that supported their development, operators of such facilities have decided not to proceed.

So, for Plymouth, it is not a choice between a market rate senior community and an affordable one. Instead, we must assess whether the proposal would support the goals of the community as expressed in the new Comprehensive Plan.

2. Traffic

This parcel is already zoned for commercial use and the residents have expressed a strong desire to see commercial use continued there.

- So, the question is what type of commercial use makes the most sense for Plymouth?

There are many people on social media pining for a Trader Joe's or similar business.

- Ironically, because food markets are the most traffic intensive type of commercial development, that is the very type of use that would create the most significant traffic problem in the area.

Conversely, senior living complexes, especially those with assisted living and memory care, are considered one of the lower traffic intensive uses. That is because:

- Many residents do not drive at all, and those who do drive are usually not tied to a commuting schedule when traffic is greatest.
- Visitor traffic is also focused away from rush hour periods. Assisted living and memory care units control visitor times to ensure safety, and visitors tend to come away from morning or evening rush times.

3. Parking

There is no question that any proposal for the site will need adequate parking.

The parking requirements and practicalities of a "mixed use" type of development being proposed will be assessed by the Planning Board (through site plan review) and the Zoning Board of Appeals (through the special permit process).

- These bodies will consider not only the representations of any applicant but also expert data and Town engineering experience to ensure residents, staff, visitors, and the public will have adequate parking while using the property.

There have been some comments made that the development may displace the vehicles of certain area residents who have been using the property for their purposes. This is not something the Town can consider in assessing parking needs for the site.

- Residents are reminded that this is private property.
- They would object if someone parked on their property, they should understand that the same applies to their use of someone else's.

4. Suitability Under the Comprehensive Plan

Plymouth has recently adopted a new Comprehensive Plan. This was the result of multiple years of community input (over 10,000 website visitors, survey respondents, and forum participants), analysis of land use, economic, and demographic data, and expert guidance based on best practices.

The result was an extensive document identifying the needs of the community and the types of action they wanted to see Town government take to accomplish their goals. Here is how this proposal would fit in with those stated interests:

A. Tax Generation

During the Comprehensive Plan process, the continued rise in property taxes and fees in Plymouth was consistently cited as the number one concern of the residents.

- They stressed the need to expand our commercial tax base in order to limit the need to increase residential property taxes.
- This proposal is for a senior living and mixed residential/commercial use complex, all of which would generate commercial tax revenue beyond what a traditional retail or office complex would provide. The senior living portion of the project alone is estimated to generate over \$800,000 in tax revenue each year. By comparison, a Costco would generate about \$250,000 in tax revenue.

B. Jobs Growth

The residents also favored businesses which will provide living wage jobs for Plymouth residents.

- In addition to construction and trades during the building of the complex, the development group for this project has indicated that the senior living uses would create around 150 permanent new jobs.
- These include skilled positions such as caregivers, aides, and administrative staff and professional staff such as doctors, nurses, and counselors, all of which are living wage occupations.

C. Development Where There is Infrastructure

The Comprehensive Plan recommends focusing commercial development in areas where there is existing infrastructure, most notably Town water and sewer.

- Both are available on this site.

Another concern with developments such as these is the proximity to emergency medical care.

- Our fire department/ambulance service is being included in the planning of this proposal.
- Additionally, proximity to Beth Israel Hospital is considered a benefit.

D. Environmental Sensitivity

The Comprehensive Plan stresses a strong preference for commercial growth in areas that are already developed, with an emphasis on reuse of properties.

- This is an existing commercial parcel which is fully developed.
- The proposed concept actually improves the environment by improving drainage and reintroducing greenspace and trees to an area completely devoid of both.

E. Community Benefit

Finally, residents have expressed a desire to encourage businesses that provide the types of goods and services needed to maintain a vibrant, year-round community.

- The proposal is for 3 separate types of services (independent living, assisted living, and memory care) that are specifically identified in the Senior Needs Study as lacking in our community.
- The proposal also includes small retail and residential along the street offering greater connection with the community.
- Even beyond that, the proposal includes the creation of public amenities and open space, things we are not allowed to require.