

VILLAGE VIEW

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Planners for future growth of the Town of Barnstable are suggesting serious consideration of changes in the town's zoning by-laws to permit construction of Open Space Residential Neighborhoods and give added protections to clean water supplies. Open space neighborhoods could bring real benefits in other ways, as well.

Commercial strips, like those spider-legging out from the center of Hyannis along all major roads (Routes 28 and 132, West Main and Pine Streets) could be curtailed because 2.5% of each acre of an open space neighborhood would offer basic business services.

Greater population density on part of each neighborhood (up to four units an acre for single family homes, and up to eight for multi-family residences) would preserve 70% of every such neighborhood as open space. Preserved areas are seen as enhancements, because plans include laying out streets and buildings to ensure that these open areas would protect views and/or important natural resources, and be visible from roadways.

Communities such as the ones planners suggest look great on paper. There is the core, consisting of multi-family housing and a few stores, possibly and church and post office. Surrounding the core, and separated from it by a green buffer zone to shield one from the other, are single-family houses on quarter-acre lots. Ringing the entire neighborhood, more greenery makes up the rest of the open space area.

This projected arrangement appears to promise improvement over our present grid pattern of single-family homes in some parts of our town, and multi-family construction crowded into certain other parts. A few questions about this do, however, come to mind.

For instance: who will be responsible for maintaining the open spaces? Who will collect and dispose of litter? If open space is landscaped, who weeds, mows, waters and fertilizes? Who rakes the leaves in the fall?

Does the open space belong, as communal property, to all those living in the neighborhood? Or does a corporation control it? Will it remain the property of the developers? Or will this open space become town property and be maintained at the expense of the taxpayers?

If a tree dies and falls, who cleans up the debris? May families enjoy picnic lunches on the greensward? If someone dumps trash there, whose responsibility is it to tidy the area?

Will the open space be used as a convenient spot to walk all the dogs in the neighborhood? Remember, the leash law of Barnstable requires that no dogs be permitted to run loose; those dog owners who comply usually lead their beloved pets to unbuild land.

Questions about possible future encroachment on open areas also arise. What about recreational use? If a few dozen youngsters want to play baseball, what's to prevent a sandlot diamond from appearing on the open space? If such use were prohibited, who enforces the regulations? May neighborhood children play freely on all the green space?

How are needs for youth-centered recreation to be met? Structures intended for ice or roller rinks, whether commercially or publicly sponsored, require nearby, large, paved, parking areas. Will neighborhood swimming pools be allowed? May single-family home owners install private pools? Or may a neighborhood elect to build one for community use? What about tennis courts?

Will open areas be utilized at night as Lover's Lanes? Could they provide cover for persons bent on criminal action in the residential sections that form the core of the neighborhood?

Of even greater concern is the question of assuring open space remains open in perpetuity. Rules and zoning codes can be changed. Town meetings or court action can overthrow well-intentioned plans. And, as the population of the town grows, pressures to invade the sanctity of acres of open space are bound to increase.

Already foreseeable is the time when most of the town's buildable land will be used. When the saturation point is reached, when there remains only the open land which has been set aside as preserved green space, developers and

builders, together with non-residents who want to live in Barnstable, will be certain to eye that open acreage covetously. Incentives to reduce its size, to broaden the tax base, to turn a dollar, to accommodate a group of influential would-be residents, will be enormous.

Comparing the open space residential neighborhoods being recommended with more traditional land use patterns with which we are familiar, we know from experience that unplanned community growth causes problems. House lots are most often laid out on a grid pattern resulting in inevitable and certain monotony. Even though sameness can be reduced with curving streets and varied architectural designs, neighborhoods unquestionably reflect character immediately recognizable to the most casual observer. And change comes to neighborhoods as they mature and age. Sometimes for the better; sometimes for the worse.

Change will affect planned communities as well as those that grow helter-skelter. Zoning codes can be altered to allow conversion of larger single-family homes to multi-family use, to permit an old and deteriorating neighborhood to be razed so that multi-family dwellings may be constructed for more intensified utilization of property.

In other words, the same forces which may threaten invasion of preserved areas in open space residential neighborhoods can work similar changes in traditional communities. The difference lies not in the possibility, but in the extent of change and the degree of damage such change might bring to one or more neighborhoods.

Traditional single-family home communities might be less vulnerable to sudden and radical changes should zoning by-laws be altered because home owners would not necessarily abandon their properties en masse. But open space residential neighborhoods that relinquished their open areas to building would see housing mushroom, almost overnight.

With sufficient iron-clad legal protections, and with adequate foresight to anticipate and respond, in advance, to questions and problems open space residential neighborhoods may face before the turn of the next century, these communities might assure residents of Barnstable protection of water supplies as well as an enviable quality of life. Keep in mind, however, that if historical patterns of growth continue at their present pace, the population of the Town of Barnstable will double in twenty years.

Nothing should be left to chance. Change, while inevitable, is not necessarily progress. Change for the sake of change may turn self-congratulation into chagrin.